

NEW SCIENCE FICTION & FANTASY

BRITISH FANTASY AWARD WINNER: BEST MAGAZINE

INTERVIEW

**LIBBY MCGUGAN:
BIG CONCEPTS & THE
MAGIC OF THE WORLD**

PLUS

**200TH ANSIBLE LINK
BOOK & FILM REVIEWS
& MUCH MORE**

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DAVID TALLERMAN
C. ALLEGRA HAWKSMOOR
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RESISTING THE ART OF CONFIRMATION

Empire of Illusion is journalist Chris Hedges' searing critique of the surrender of American culture to corporate power and its descent into consumerism. His key concern is the way 'free market' pressures influence artists, academics and journalists to confirm the expectations of their audiences and encourage them to find refuge in the familiar. For Hedges, the outcome is that "we become trapped in the linguistic prison of incessant repetition". We narrow our horizons and limit our experiences. Settling for repetition of the familiar reinforces prejudices and produces art that rejects complexity, ignores ambiguity and denies the possibility of self-criticism.

A swift search-engine rummage for sf movies due for release in 2014 yields a list so loaded with the rehashed, resuscitated and desperately made-over it's beyond satire. Encores and resurrections include the X-Men, Spider-Man, Captain America, Robocop, Planet of the Apes, Godzilla and the latest addition to Michael Bay's execrable *Transformers* franchise. *Vampire Academy*, *Maze Runner*, *Edge of Tomorrow* and *Guardians of the Galaxy* are fresh titles on screen but have well established roots in print, while *Tomorrowland* has links to a future-themed domain at Disney's theme parks. Only the Wachowskis' *Jupiter Ascending* appears to be based on a wholly original narrative. Some of these films will be polished and entertaining, but where are the stories offering a fresh perspective on the changes we're living through and the prospects we face?

Sadly, talented people collude in creating a culture of confirmation. *The Guardian* is flogging Masterclasses with 'name' writers in collaboration with the University of East Anglia: for £1500 you have three hours per week for three months to tackle crime, history or travel writing; for £4000 you get six months on storytelling, first drafts or 'new biography'. We're fans of adult learning, but in this case the emphasis on tools, techniques and conventions risks cultivating a 'writing by numbers' approach. Craft is important but it's the spark of empathy, originality and vision that makes a story unforgettable. We look forward to the *Guardian*-UEA 'Write like William Blake Masterclass'.

We're realistic: we know *Interzone* has no real influence on the literary mainstream. But we're determined to do what we can to resist a culture of confirmation, exploitation and mindless consumption. We're too shy to blow our own trumpet at TTA Towers, but as we celebrate the publication of our 250th issue and David Langford's 200th Ansible Link, we're happy to reveal a few generous words of encouragement from one of our contributors, Georgina Bruce:

"What really makes *Interzone* special is its vision. Innovative, subversive, disturbing, political, daring: *Interzone* is never afraid to break the rules. To be part, in however minor a way, of such a bold literary project is a true privilege and a source of joy."

Publisher

TTA Press, 5 Martins Lane,
Witcham, Ely, Cambs CB6 2LB, UK
w: ttapress.com
e: interzone@ttapress.com
f: facebook.com/TTAPress
t: @TTApress

Editor

Andy Cox
e: andy@ttapress.com
Assistant Fiction Editor
Andy Hedgecock
Book Reviews Editor
Jim Steel
e: jim@ttapress.com
Story Proofreader
Peter Tennant
e: whitenoise@ttapress.com

Events

Roy Gray
e: roy@ttapress.com
Technical Assistance
Marc-Anthony Taylor

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Unsolicited submissions of short stories are always welcome, but please follow the guidelines.



INTERZONE'S 2014 COVER ARTIST IS WAYNE HAAG
www.ankaris.com/blog



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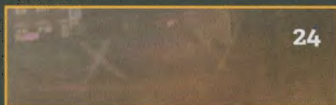
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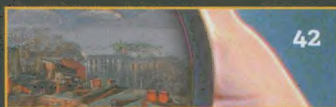
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THE 200TH ANSIBLE LINK

Iain Banks was Twitter's 'top UK news trending topic' for 2013, with 'UK storm', 'NHS' and Seamus Heaney in second, third and fourth places. His pet hate Margaret Thatcher came eighth and Richard III ninth. (*Independent*)

Awards. *Arthur C. Clarke Award for Impact of Imagination on Society* (not the sf award): Ursula K. Le Guin. • *Eleanor Farjeon Award* for outstanding contribution to children's books: David Almond. (*Guardian*) • *National Book Award Book of the Year* for 2013: Neil Gaiman, *The Ocean at the End of the Lane*. • *Saltire Society First Book of the Year*: Tim Armstrong, *Air Cuan Dubh Drilseach (On a Glittering Black Sea)*, a space opera praised by the judges as 'the first genuine sci-fi novel in Gaelic.' (*Scotsman*) • *SFWA Grand Master* for 2014: Samuel R. Delany.

Brian Aldiss quit the habit: '... these days I don't read any science fiction – or do I? Now I only read Tolstoy.' (*Guardian*)

Peter Nicholls writes: 'I have become, appropriately, the first cyborg editor of a science-fiction encyclopedia.' The ravages of Parkinson's Disease have been countered by electrical Deep Brain Stimulation via fine wires inserted into the sub-thalamic nucleus of his brain: 'The result is immediate and spectacular. I now speak much more clearly, walk normally, no longer fear falls, look younger (and according to some women, handsomer).' I am carefully not rereading Michael Crichton's *The Terminal Man*.

K.M. Peyton, Carnegie Medal-winning children's author, received

an MBE in the New Year Honours. Her supernatural fiction includes *A Pattern of Roses* (1972) and *Unquiet Spirits* (1997).

Court Circular. *Asterix* artist Albert Uderzo is in dispute with his daughter and son-in-law over the mighty cartoon franchise. He plans to sue them for 'psychological violence' while they say he's mentally ill, being cruelly exploited, etc, and filed a lawsuit about this in 2011. (BBC) • Bob and Harvey Weinstein of Miramax, which sold the *Hobbit* film rights to New Line/Warner in 1998, are suing the studio for \$75+ million, claiming the film was split into three 'solely to deprive plaintiffs'. In what Warner calls 'one of the great blunders in movie history', Miramax accepted 5% of the gross for one film only, assuming there could be only one. (BBC) • Frank Darabont, creator of *The Walking Dead*, is suing the US AMC TV network for 'tens of millions of dollars' for (a) sacking him before the second series, when his profit share would increase; (b) eliminating paper profit through a 'self-dealing' fiddle whereby the AMC affiliate that makes the show licenses it to AMC at less than the production cost. (BBC)

Samuel Butler (1835–1902) was not available for comment on the Erewhon brand of gluten-free breakfast cereals distributed by Erewhon Markets, Los Angeles. 'Eerfnutulg,' he failed to say.

Ghost Story. 'Nelson Mandela revisited his cell several times after his death.' (BBC website caption)

Censored! The Saudi Arabian Commission for the Promotion of Virtue and Prevention of Vice

raided bookshops and ordered them to stop selling the sf novel *H W J N* by Ibraheem Abbas and Yasser Bahjatt (translator of the English edition). This treats the jinn in sf terms and features human/jinni romance, horrifying the Saudi equivalent of our 'Harry Potter is satanic!' loons. A shocked Facebook post which may have triggered the ban warned that this could tempt teenage girls to experiment with...Ouija boards.

Mary Shelley's original notebook drafts of *Frankenstein* can be viewed free online at shelleygodwinarchive.org/contents/frankenstein.

Margaret Atwood broadcast reassurance to a Radio 4 chat programme audience: 'If you get caught by the zombie apocalypse, stick with me – I'll take care of you.'

Court Circular II. After Hummingbird Productions' November announcement of a 2015 sequel to *It's a Wonderful Life* (1946), Paramount Studios made ominous noises about owning all the 'necessary rights' which Hummingbird say are in the public domain. (BBC) • Stef Coburn, whose father Anthony Coburn scripted the first ever *Doctor Who* storyline and introduced the Tardis, claims copyright on the police-box time machine concept (registered by the BBC in the 1980s, never previously challenged) and demands better recognition of his parent's 'seminal contribution'; also money. (*Independent*)

Thog's Masterclass. *Dept of Feminist Awareness.* 'Her breasts were a smaller version of the woman herself – massive, firm and



DAVID LANGFORD

overpoweringly impressive.' (Isaac Asimov, *Foundation and Earth*, 1986) • *Eyeballs in the Sky*. 'Then his eyes moved up along the rough tweed of his trousers to the shorter motion of his thighs...' (Lester del Rey, 'The Monster', 1951 *Argosy*) • *Anatomy Dept.* 'She owned a pair of well-filled legs...' 'His tie hung limply like a lost erection.' "Coffee," he said, his voice as cool as his neck was hot.' 'The gaudy

decor bounced off his eyeballs...' (all Kitty Sewell, *Ice Trap*, 2005) • *Secret Kung-Fu Death Grip*. 'Feng held the man's eyes, shook his head.' (Ramez Naam, *Nexus*, 2013) • *Arithmetic Dept.* 'The three of us have been a couple from the beginning...' (Laurell K. Hamilton, *Kiss the Dead*, 2012) • *True Romance (Hard-Boiled Dept.)*. 'Butler pumped hard now and felt himself getting crazy. Somebody

had stuffed eight pigeons up his ass and he felt like he was going to explode. The pigeons flew through his penis and he bit his lip as they flew out the tip. He hung onto her shoulders for support and she fell back against the mirror on the wall, her eyes rolling in her head, because the pigeons had flown into her egg roll and were flapping their wings around in there.' (Philip Kirk, *Chinese Roulette*, 1984)

R.I.P.

John Fortune (1939–2013), UK actor and satirist whose BBC2 series *In the Looking Glass* (1978) explored SF themes, died on 31 December aged 74. His 1971 *A Melon for Ecstasy*, a spoof erotic novel about a literal tree-lover, was not quite genre fantasy...

Richard Gallen, US publishing attorney, book packager and investor who provided financial backing and advice to various publishers including Baen Books, Bluejay, Tor and Carroll & Graf, died on 3 December aged 80.

Joel Lane (1963–2013), UK horror/urban fantasy author and editor whose collection *Where Furnaces Burn* won a 2013 World Fantasy Award, died unexpectedly on 25 November; he was only 50. He had published short stories since the 1980s, winning two British Fantasy Awards; his first novel was *From Blue to Black* (2001).

Joseph J. Lazzaro (1957–2013), US author of book-length nonfiction who published two collaborative stories and three essays in *Analog*, died on 18 November.

Doris Lessing (1919–2013),

distinguished literary author who besides many other honours in her long career won the 2007 Nobel Prize for Literature (and was splendidly cranky about this award), died on 17 November at the age of 94. Several of her novels have fantastic content; she made unashamed use of traditional sf devices in the 'Canopus in Argos: Archives' sequence opening with *Shikasta* (1979), though this was not her finest work. She was a highly approachable if somewhat awe-inspiring guest of honour at the 1987 Brighton Worldcon.

Hugh Nissenson (1933–2013), US author who published sf in *Playboy* as early as 1964 and whose sf novel was *The Song of the Earth* (2001), died on 13 December aged 80.

Robert Reginald (Michael Roy Burgess, 1948–2013), US bibliographer, editor, publisher and author whose Borgo Press (1975–1998; 2004–current) issued a great many important critical monographs about sf and fantasy, died on 20 November aged 65. His bibliographical magnum opus was the two-volume *Science Fiction and Fantasy Literature: A Checklist, 1700–1974* (1979).

Graham Stone (1926–2013),

Australian bibliographer and publisher whose reference works ran from *An Index to the Australian SF Magazines, Part One* (1955) to the 2010 revision of his monumental *Australian SF Bibliography, 1848–1999* (2004), died on 16 November; he was 87.

Ned Vizzini (1981–2013), US author whose four YA novels include sf and fantasy, committed suicide on 19 December; he was 32.

Colin Wilson (1931–2013), UK author who achieved instant success with his study of literary and real-world 'outsiders' in *The Outsider* (1956), and later became better known for very many nonfiction works on crime and the paranormal, died on 5 December aged 82. His ideas about the unexplored potential of the human mind took sf form in his Cthulhu Mythos novels *The Mind Parasites* (1967) and *The Philosopher's Stone* (1969), and in more conventional sf terms in the late-1980s YA 'Spider World' sequence. *The Space Vampires* (1976), a homage to A E van Vogt's 'Asylum', was filmed as *Lifeforce* (1985). He was my last surviving collaborator on *The Necronomicon* (1978) edited by George Hay.

DAMAGED

BONNIE JO STUFFLEBEAM

I CAN'T ESCAPE MY JOB. EVERYWHERE I GO I SEE

ads for the company. On the subway, the sidewalks with our company logo engraved in concrete, the talking billboards which feature the intertwined bodies of flawless men and women in the downtown AdZones. I'm good at what I do. PlayMatez look and feel real: warm skin, a clean but undeniably human smell. Only "real" isn't a word we're supposed to use. Of course they feel real. They are real. What I mean is they feel the same as blood-and-guts people do. They walk, talk, and fuck the same.

Except for the damaged ones.

The damaged eat with their hands, like savages. They'll eat whatever you give them – stale cornbread, powdered milk, reconstituted beef cutlets – and demand nothing more. They wear this far off expression whenever they're addressed, as if they're calculating the benefits of an answer. When the damaged speak, they speak in near riddles, riddles to which I have always suspected there are no solutions.

I work in the building where they make PlayMatez, both the damaged and the ones that work right. It's a fifty-story skyscraper on the edge of the industrial district, which looks like most every other district, shiny buildings packed tight as the pedestrians rushing down grimy sidewalks. Except in the industrial district, smog fills the streets from a ten-hour flow of traffic, the constant hum of machinery operating inside. Our factory is one in a long line of unidentifiable factories, all black. In the basement, human and robotic workers toil over the assemblies. I've been down there only twice. The workers' bodies are all bone and bulk; our robots are constructed from bioengineered human muscle. That and Cyberskin, our own patented silicone/skin blend. The only way you could tell the humans from the robots would be to look at their insides. It's my job to know



ILLUSTRATED BY BEN BALDWIN



what those look like. I build the internal networks, sculpt intestine from tubing. My work is replicated by the millions.

My workshop on the third floor is concrete and steel. Outside the door is a silver plaque with my name in bold letters: ROBIN KIRKLAND. The inside has a window on which I've hung purple curtains to make the place seem homey. In the hazy daylight, I carve muscle tissue with a sculpting knife. I bend microfilaments into circulatory shapes. I work alone, hunched over a table that lines the whole back wall of the workshop, and shape the parts I'm given until they look satisfactory. Then I ease them down into the plastic PlayMate mold to make sure they're the right size.

Once I've got all the parts in there, save the upper muscle layer, I often stop and stare. Inside the mold, thin, green wires reach like a hand into the head, crisscross through the torso and down into the arms, the legs. They don't carry blood through the body – our PlayMatez are bloodless – but they do carry heat. The handbook says when the wires have been activated, they glow blue like veins. Some of the organs we don't bother with. The ones that filter waste are useless, as any food consumed travels through the pink intestinal tubing intact and exits as it would in a human, but whole. The ability to eat is just for show. Once I'm done gaping, I lay down the final muscle layer and weave the wires through it.

The table's been organized into stations, a new station for each part, except the skin and bone. Another woman works the skin. The tech for these parts isn't mine. It filters down from the fiftieth floor. All I do is figure out new ways to make it fit, new ways to make the robots more authentic. I also sculpt hearts.

But for every hundred PlayMatez that come out normal, one comes out wrong. It's a glitch in the system, and like clockwork it occurs at the same intervals. The damaged have cold skin, a malfunction in the wires. And like I said, something weird in the expression, in the way they speak.

The damaged aren't sold with the rest. They're sold, the females and males alike, to specialty shops, bulk buyers. Management knows what

those buyers do to them. We ignore their beckoning fingers when we pass them on street corners in less favorable parts of town, in which the majority of us factory workers live. I can't be seen picking those damaged up. The ones I collect come from the subway, where they cower in corners and eat the skin off rats. Even though they don't need to eat, they've been programmed to. There's a switch in the control panel that lets you turn that off, but most people are scared to touch them, and in the subway it's hard to tell the damaged from the homeless. I know them because I'm drawn to them.

THE FIRST, HE was a Damien II. He carried the name on his inner thigh, and when I lifted the edge of his shorts in the half light of my apartment to find it, he slapped my hand away.

"What's black and white and cheeky?" he said.

"I don't know. What?" I asked, but he just laughed. He was strange-looking, beautiful of course. They were all beautiful. But his beauty, unlike the other Damien IIs, was forced. He shouldn't have been beautiful. He was too broken for beauty. I'd found him wandering the streets like a lost child. He couldn't have been older than three, though of course he was built to resemble a twenty five year old. His model had been released five years previous, and it was still in production, though soon to be retired. The Damien II's bulky body had light features, light skin and eyes and hair, and he was prone to fits of giddiness. In the damaged that giddiness manifested as an inability to be clever, his riddles repetitions of the same template.

"What's white and purple and sunshine?" he said.

"Are you hungry, Damien? Would you like some pasta?"

He nodded. I fixed him pasta from a can. As he ate each string of spaghetti, picking it up with the tips of his fingernails and dropping it into his open mouth, he looked not at his plate but off into the darkened bedroom across the apartment.

I had little experience with the damaged then, one on one. I asked him if he saw something. He didn't answer until his plate was empty, the pool of tomato sauce at the bottom untouched.

"If the blind can't lead the blind, who will they turn to?" For a moment his lips were a narrow line. Then he broke into a blank grin. "What's white and white and white all over?"

He was, white all over. When he took off his clothes, even his nipples were so light they glowed in the dark. I liked his whiteness. It kept me at a distance from memories I would have rather forgotten but which loomed in the brute thrust of every man, human or not: the memory of a dark and warm body beside me, the bitter smell of oil paint and turpentine heavy in black patches of body hair.

Instead of curses the Damien II moaned nonsense, words pulled from his language bank seemingly at random: stripes, dartboard, keel, burst. Any neighbors listening in wouldn't have had a clue as to what we were doing. Though I wasn't worried about people listening. They rarely did anymore, too absorbed in the constant hum of YouChannels.

As he slept, I imagined what his wires looked like, that blue glow inside him. I wondered what his breath looked like leaving the lungs I had made. How his skin would come apart to reveal my masterwork. I traced a line down his back and pretended my finger was a knife.

I KEPT DAMIEN II for six days, until I began to worry that whoever owned him, and he was too clean to be abandoned, would come looking. It was theft, after all, of the highest class, as PlayMatez were valued not only monetarily but also emotionally, as precious companions. And he wasn't what I was looking for, not really. I wanted one whose riddles made me shiver. Like the painter used to, when he sketched me with my clothes on and made me feel like he was painting the invisible pieces I could never show him. Words that would open me up and leave my insides exposed. Without that, I couldn't be bothered to take care of someone. But when I found it, I told myself I would hold their hand and keep them safe even as they self-destructed. Which was inevitable with the damaged. They wore their riddles out until they could no longer form words or even master the complicated muscle movements of a smile. I'll be honest; I wanted to watch. I wanted to be there for their

destruction. It intrigued and repulsed me.

I wasn't allowed to buy a PlayMate for myself. Conflict of interest: we signed a contract. If we were to grow attached to one of our own creations, it might affect our decisions. We would be tempted to change things we wanted to see changed, to create models we wanted, not models that the public wanted.

Instead we cared nothing for the models we worked on. Each worker was in charge of such a small portion of the product that it was easy to be detached.

Following my week with the Damien II, I took home as many damaged as I could find. None of them were what I was looking for. I brought back a Ken V, an original Matthew, even a Max II, trying to wrap my head around what it was I wanted. They were crazy, of course, but their riddles were often monotonous, the same old tricks of language. Uninspired. Random. The Max II even seemed to have a hold on where he was, what he was. His riddles were nothing like riddles.

"I'll take care of you, my Clementine," he said, leading me back, down, into my bed. "I'll make the ceiling spin like roses."

After I let them free, I watched them wander off into the world again, back to their subway stations or the homes where no one watched over them. I wasn't sad to see them go. Some, I knew, had probably been shoved into closets, deemed broken, only to escape when their switches were turned on by some nosy kid. If I knew they had no one to go home to, I opened the control panel in the upper left side of their chest, passed over the red dials and the memory slot and switched off their hunger.

The truth is I don't know where they went when I let them go and I don't know where they came from before I picked them up off the ground or carried them from the dumpsters. I cleaned them. Always I ran water in the bath and let them soak, wiped the grime from their faces, from their bruised bodies, not like a mother but a cold stranger doing them a cold favor. I gave them clean clothes, clothes that once belonged to the painter; he had left them. In his clothes, the damaged seemed as if they could walk into our factory and earn their own keep. The regular

ones could do that, of course. That's what happened to most of them after they were no longer wanted. They could earn their price back and be given a life of their own. But not the damaged. They can never work.

THAT'S WHAT I told myself when I finally did cut one open, that he would be helpless and alone in the world. I tried not to look at his name when I did it. I just wanted to see inside. My fingers itched for it. So when he was fast asleep, naked, on his stomach in my bed, I took a knife from the kitchen and ran it down his back, right where I knew the seam had been. I peeled the skin back as little as I could manage while still being able to see inside. I figured it would hurt less, opening the old seam wound. Because these PlayMatez, they feel pain. They feel it at smaller doses, but they feel it nonetheless. That is part of what makes them so believable.

Inside, the wires I crafted gleamed blue in the light that crept through my window from the streetlights outside. It is never dark in the city. I could see the wires embedded in the thick red muscle tissue.

I opened the flap wider so I could take in all of the upper back. I wanted to know if my handiwork was what had made him damaged, but everything else looked as I'd seen it before. I moved the muscles aside so I could see the deeper organs. He was a newer model, though not the newest, so his wires were a little thick, his lungs the color of vomit. I'd since fixed both of these problems, though peering in at the heart I noticed something I hadn't yet changed, something I had yet to even know needed changing: the heart pulsed on its own, a movement independent of its beats. I watched the red tissue bump bump, then pulse, bump bump, then pulse, bump bump, then pulse. It was expending more energy than it should with those extra pulses, pointless energy. The pulses weren't affecting his body in any way.

I touched the heart. It felt like a wet sponge beneath my finger. It was partly made of sponge. From far away it would have resembled a human heart, though it was a simpler design, a pear-shaped lump with a single opening at the top where the wires connected for the energy to feed

through. Suddenly he moaned, and his insides shuddered. I panicked. Pulled my hands out of him and tried to shut his skin back, but I didn't have the tools. I backed away. He moved on the bed. I couldn't watch him stand. If he stood, parts of him might have bulged out the back; the spine, attached to the skin with the rest of his bones, wouldn't keep him from collapsing. I hesitated, stepped forward, then reached back inside and grabbed a handful of wires, tugging them. They sparked in my hands, then faded. His heart slowed, stopped, its final pulse even and sure.

I heard the sound of his machinery dying and then he lay unmoving on my bed. I removed the wires and spread them over the blanket and looked down into them. That was how I knew them best. Free of skin.

His body I tossed into the dumpster outside wrapped in a black trash bag. It felt like a dirty cliché, and even though I knew there's no crime against disabling them, I felt like I would get caught. That night I didn't sleep. Instead I thought of that damaged I would watch destroy himself. I wondered if I really wanted to see someone else doing what I'd done to myself when I let the painter leave. But the idea felt too perceptive, and so I shook it off.

THE HEART TROUBLED me. I didn't understand why it should be working overtime. When my shift was over, I went to the subway station. I found a young man cowed into a corner with several of the females, sleeping, dirt streaked across his face. A brand new model. So new the ads hadn't even gone up yet, and I marveled at how quickly he'd wound up here. I shook him awake, took his hand. The strangers in the station probably thought I was a shelter woman, so I tried to act like one. I patted his hand while we walked.

"Oh, dearie," I said. "We'll have you fixed up in no time. Get that hunger switch turned off. Clean you up. Make sure you have a nice bed, yes sir."

Nobody looked me in the eye. What those ladies at the shelters do isn't thought of as a charity but a burden, one people didn't want to share. But of course, I reminded myself, I don't

work at the shelter. I work for the company that put him here.

Back at home, once the Christopher had stripped to his skin, I ran the bath water and led him to it. I scrubbed all signs of dirt away, wondering how he could have gathered so much in so little time. It'd only been one month since we produced his prototype. He must've been one of three hundred models, tops.

Which meant there were roughly two more like him, damaged, out there already.

"I'm sweet sugar in my beginning, a rose in my middle, a sweetheart in my end. What am I?" he said as I helped him out of the bath. His flaccid penis slapped against his inner thigh.

"Oh God," I said, laughing. "They sure gave you something to brag about."

There had been a push for a sensitive model. I imagined that was where his riddle came from, some combination of all the love words they programmed into him. It bored me. I wanted something that made a garbled kind of profound sense, something I might read in a poem, if I read poems.

I didn't let him dress. I put him into bed. Beside him my real heart raced. When I heard his sleep breath, deep and rattled, I cut him down the back.

He was so new his wires glistened. The heart, the newest model, pulsed the same as the other. I reached in and wrapped my hand around it. I ignored the movement of his body. I ripped the heart out. Ripped the wires. Piled them in a bunch on the bed. The body was silent, still. I hid the heart in the drawer of my bedside table. I sat and stared at the confusion of veins. My handiwork. I never could've imagined it would look so beautiful. Still it glowed blue with life.

I did this again and again, the next night and the next. It began to feel like part of a routine. Without it, without the dying embers of artificial life beside me, I found I couldn't sleep.

THEN I NOTICED something different. He was an older model, one of the oldest, and when I pulled out his heart, it had begun to crack. I could see inside the complicated mess something I didn't make: a barely perceptible flesh-colored box. I removed it, and between my fingers the

box squished. It was a tiny rectangle, like a coffin for a cockroach, made of some material I'd never seen before, nearly transparent and near the same consistency of the silicone skin. There was something hard inside.

I dug my nails into the box, and the flesh stuff came away easily enough. I imagined that with a few more years of energy pumping around it, the box would have worn away on its own. I couldn't imagine how it had already held up for so long. Once I had peeled that part off, I held in my hands a hard metal screw, no bigger than my pinkie and rusted brown. I turned it over in my fingers. It smelled like wet copper. I lifted it to my mouth and stuck out my tongue. It tasted like blood – definitely copper.

I didn't understand. Why was it there?

I tore through my apartment, collecting all the hearts I'd saved from the bedside drawer, from my cupboard, from the bottom of the fridge. I tore each one open, and inside all of them I found the box. In some it was less worn, harder to tear, and in others it was more so. I collected the screws in a pile and stared at them, wondering. I wondered until my eyes ached. And then I slept.

I dreamt about wires wrapping around me. The wires crept up and over me from beneath the bed. I couldn't breathe they wrapped so tight, like a lover's desperate embrace. I woke up choking.

I TOOK ONE of the screws to work with me, and every ten minutes reached into my pocket to touch it, just to make sure it was still there. I wanted to know more. But there was no way to figure it out on my own. I would have had to give myself away. Tell them what I'd been doing. I would have to come clean. I could've lost my job. Without my job, I'd have nothing.

I went home. But not before I found another PlayMate to take with me.

His name, his thigh told me, was Lachlan 1.0. He was a middle-aged model, made back when the company was attempting to modernize its image. That soon fell by the wayside when they realized people wanted to be taken out of this world, put into a classic world they had only read about. Lachlan 1.0 didn't test well. He was

updated to the Lance I not long after his design. They'd released the ones they'd already manufactured, but he sold poorly.

It wasn't just the name. The Lachlan was modern all over. He had metallic hair, cut into a Sidehawk. The hair on the one I found was greasy, flecked with dirt. All Lachlan models had an X molded into one of the front teeth, and a gauge in the ear so big you could fit a tea-cup in it, though the one I brought home had removed his piercing, leaving the shriveled hole. His model was thin, lanky, unlike the rest of the PlayMatez. Because of that, he fit in better with the young people. He could, the company had hoped, attract the large base of alternative youth, the only base we'd yet to conquer. As it turned out, the company didn't have a clue. They programmed him to say stupid things in an attempt at hip language. They programmed him to be impassioned about resistance to authority. They trained him to be everything people didn't want to see in a robot.

He did make a nice change to look at though. Across his upper torso his living tattoo danced; comprised of microscopic LEDs, the ink ocean roared over his ribcage. His skin stretched tight over him like a canvas. When I gave him a towel, I was sorry to see him cover up.

I suggested we go to the bedroom, where I wanted to see his uniqueness prove artificial. On the inside, he'd look the same as all the others. He would have one of those screws in a box in his heart.

"Got any Pips?" he asked. He walked through the bathroom door and across the living area – my apartment was all open space in the common areas, no doors – into the kitchen. He searched through the cabinets which lined one wall. He opened the fridge and studied the contents. "I dig a bowl of cereal in the night as well, if you don't mind."

Suddenly I was nervous. He was speaking like normal. But he had that damaged look, he did, and his voice sounded like an echo of what it should be, deep and lilting. He hadn't said a thing to me the whole way over, aside from some weird remark: "How does a train transfer someone from the underworld?" Now he was asking for Pips and cereal, neither of which I had.

And he had just let me bathe him like that. If he wasn't damaged, he should have objected. He should have made small talk, asked me my name.

"I have some whiskey," I said. "Old stuff. Just a bit left, but you can have it."

I pointed to the cabinet. He poured two glasses and handed one to me.

"Right well you do," he said as he took a sip. "This is rude stuff here."

I drank mine in a gulp. He refilled my glass.

"Lachlan, right?" I asked. "How are you feeling this evening?"

He still hadn't looked me in the eye. He peered into his glass, then across the cabinets.

"Better now, all cleaned off and all."

"Did you enjoy the bath?"

Then he did it, looked me straight on. "Right well I did." He winked.

I sunk into my dining chair. My hands trembled. I put my glass down.

"Didn't you?" he asked. "I thought that was the factual point." He stared back at the same spot on the cabinet.

"Are you looking for something?" I asked.

"You know I've been wondering, what's a rude woman like you doing, picking people off the streets? Honestly, I thought you were taking me to one of those safeties. Thought I was in for a feast. What you've got here is potato flakes and pastry cakes. Do you mind?" He took the box of pastry cakes from the cabinet, unwrapped one, shoved it in his mouth in one bite. "You're not exactly one of those women, are you?" he said, mouth full.

"I'm not," I said, picking at my nails. "Are you a cop? A representative of the company? Were you sent to make sure I'm not, you know, engaging myself with your lot?"

"Am I a cop?" He laughed. "Why, have you been unruly?"

"Of course not." I drained the second glass. "So, a representative?"

"You work for the company then? Right well. Methinks what you're doing here is unruly indeed, am I right?"

"All I've done is give you a bath, a bit of drink." I looked at the towel wrapped around his middle. "Would you like some clothes?"

He shrugged. "I imagine I'll be getting naked round here sometime. If I know your make."

"I didn't ask you here to get naked. Honestly, I was trying to help you. I thought you were damaged."

He grinned. His tooth was chipped below the X.

"I could be, if you wanted." He looked at me again. "What do women want?" He laughed. "That's riddle enough for the world. What is the square root of a woman?" He lifted the whiskey bottle and poured some down his throat. "What burns going down and sings coming up?"

"Stop it," I said. I looked at the door, then back at him. I crossed and uncrossed my legs, wrung my hands. "I was trying to help you. I didn't bring you here to mock me."

"I need your help," he said. "I've got all this energy. I need to know what makes a human hum."

When he moved toward me, I didn't try to turn away. He wasn't damaged, I could see that, not the way the others were. But there was something in him that was gone, and I wanted more than anything to find what it was. I wanted to cut him open anyway. I wanted to know what was going on in there. I wanted that body on my bed.

He pushed me past the dining table, through the door into the bedroom, onto the bed. Until, effortlessly, he was naked, and my skirt lay discarded on the floor. The warmth of his body startled me. I closed my eyes and imagined the painter. His skin the color of twilight. His sad brown eyes. But the painter had always been silent and steady when we made love, and Lachlan moaned and thrashed. Then came the awkward moment when I was done and told him, which set off his own spasm. They'd been made to trigger when we said so. He quivered under me.

Afterward I waited for him to fall asleep, but as the clock clicked past three in the morning he kept singing beside me, a vile drinking song.

"Don't you sleep?" I asked.

"Not much," he said. "Not if someone's eyeing me like that."

I tried to fake it, but the second my eyes shut, I was out.

WHEN I WOKE, he hovered over me, a tangle of wires in his hands.

"I see why you were wigged," he said. "About me being a cop. You know, I don't think there's a law against this, though." He dropped the wires onto my bare stomach. "Except, of course, you work for the company. Can't own your own Play-Mate. That makes this theft. And, to top that off, taking 'em apart like this makes it destruction of stolen property. The highest degree of destruction, methinks – artificial intelligence."

I sat up. Below him, covering the floor of my bedroom, were the rest of the wires I'd been saving, pulled from beneath the bed and strewn from the bed to the door. The drawers of my bedside table and dresser were open, wires spilling from them as well.

"No, you see, it's what I do. I sculpt those wires," I said, light-headed, heart stuttering.

"Right well. If you did, Ms Robin Kirkland, you'd know, wouldn't you, that the only way they color blue like this is from use."

"Of course," I said. "Of course I know that. They were given to me, quite obviously, after they were dismantled. So I could look over my work."

"What I can't figure is, decent, rude woman like you, what are you doing snatching our insides out? What do you find in there?" he said, his voice hard.

"Are you going to go to the company? Are you going to tell them?" I could feel the sweat beads on my forehead. The room was hot. I tried to sit up, but I was too dizzy.

"I should. Save my own skin, right well?" Then, no warning, the blank look passed back over his face, like he'd never seen this room before. "But it wouldn't be like that. I would be wires and dirt, I would. Sure, they might fire you, but me – what to silence me but dirt?"

It sounded like poetry.

"No, I won't tell the company. Not if you tell me what you've lit on."

The words came easy. I wanted to explain, so he wouldn't tell, so he wouldn't think poorly of me, so he would understand, even just a little bit. So I told him all of it, from the first uncertain reasons I brought the damaged PlayMatez home – that I liked the way my work looked alive and throbbing underneath me, and I needed some-

thing cold to hold onto, because a warm body would remind me of the painter, as his had – to my unbearable urge to look inside, to discover where a body's coldness came from. I told him of the discovery of the hearts' extraneous pulses, how I found the flesh-colored boxes with the screws inside. When I came to the end of my account, he looked at me as if I had told him I was dying.

"I feel myself running down, you know," he said. "Scares me right well. You know I'm not one of them, the damaged. But I've seen my make go that way. Most of the time, it doesn't happen soon enough. We're abandoned in closets and tossed in dumpsters." He gave me a look that, for a moment, made me question whether he hadn't been watching me all along, seen the trash bags I'd carried out. "But for those of us still switched on, most of us go damaged." He shrugged. "Two to five years, if we're used proper."

"My work should last longer than that. It's designed to last longer."

"What of those screw boxes? How long they rigged to last?"

"I don't make those," I said. "I don't know where those come from."

"Methinks we're not rigged to last. Methinks permanent companionship, it fizzles out in five years tops."

"How old are you?"

"Five. And a half."

"You look good, for your age."

Up close, his eyes were as grey as the smog outside, his eyelashes long and beautiful. The dark must've kept me from noticing. Or maybe I kept me from noticing, unwilling to grow attached.

"I don't know about you," he said. "But I want to know what's inside me."

I shook my head. "I couldn't."

"Not that, you wacked woman. I want to go to work."

WE RODE THE subway over once the building closed. I had a key, for those late nights working, that would get us through the front door, but it would only get us as far as my workshop. Lachlan told me not to worry, and though I didn't know if I could trust him I didn't care. I was tired; what we were doing made my stomach spin as it

hadn't since the painter and I made silent love on the kitchen floor. So I led Lachlan through the lobby, sneaking past the camera's gaze. We rode the elevator to the fiftieth floor. We exited. These were the doors that belonged to the people who did nothing with their hands. They watched and decided, but they'd never touched one of them, not in any professional sense.

Lachlan led the way. As it turned out, he'd been there before. He was, he admitted in a whisper, hired by the company. They'd seen me, didn't I think they would see me? In the subway, lifting the damaged from the ground, dragging them with me on the train.

He knew where they would keep the files.

I wanted this adventure. I wanted to run back home. I wanted to push Lachlan against the wall and take him. My breath shook. But I knew what we were going to find. Really this trip was just for show. I knew I'd lose my job, sooner or later, and Lachlan knew he'd lose himself. Of course the company programmed our robots to fail. Of course the boxes were meant to biodegrade, the screw to be let loose into the heart, where it would puncture and damage the tissue irreparably. Companies had been manufacturing products that would run down eventually for years. It started with refrigerators and now here we were.

But why were some of them made damaged? If the company created them on purpose, was it for people like me, too broken to keep unbroken things around? I half hoped this was the case. It would mean there were enough people like me to warrant a market for them.

Once we were by the office door, Lachlan wedged his fingernail into the skin on the right side of his chest and pried his control panel open. He pushed his finger into the panel and pulled out a square chip as small as a tooth. At first I thought it was his memory card, but it wasn't. There was a slot in a similar panel next to the door, and he pushed the chip into it. The door clicked open. We went inside.

"How did you do that?" I asked.

"I saw them do this when we met here before, to complete my paperwork a few years ago. I recognized the tech. Rigged one up myself," he whispered, though we were alone. "Spiked the cameras, too."

The file cabinet was locked – the company kept their files stored on discs outside the computer, for fear of hackers, competitors, and free rights organizations. Lachlan picked it with a hair pin. I wanted to laugh, but I couldn't bring myself to make the noise. Inside he found several spherical discs, the size and shape of gold balls, labeled from the start of the company, twelve years ago. He dropped them into the bag he'd brought. We left the way we came in.

Afterward, as we ran through the streets, clutching the bag, I felt the air on my face, and it felt like it used to, when I was a kid, when I was a young woman in love with a flesh-and-blood man whose clothes were covering the body of the robot running before me. I had to stop several times to catch a breath. Lachlan ran ahead on thin legs.

The painter's legs had also been thin. Always he moved like a shadow through my apartment. He too was broken. "Depressed feels like such a thin word," he had said to me often in that dark, "and it's such a thin feeling." He passed that brokenness down to me. He had dreams of another country, of walking on green instead of grey. When he got his chance, he went.

"Come with me." We had been in bed. Outside we could hear the muffled roar of the billboards going in the AdZone four blocks down. A sound you got used to. He claimed he had never been used to it, never would be. "You need to get out of here."

"I can't," I said, rolling away. How could I go with no guarantee we would make it, no guarantee that life was better on the other side? His darkness was beautiful, but he would drown me in it in a world where I was nothing but his. After all, a place is just a place. There would be nothing there that could sculpt me into a different kind of person.

I didn't go with him. He left me behind.

At my apartment, Lachlan went through the files, plugging the discs into his panel. When he found what we were looking for, I brought it up on my computer. I was right and wrong; the damaged weren't a mistake. Or, they weren't as big a mistake as the company would like people to think. They were, the files said, an unfortunate consequence of the built-in obsolescence, the

biodegradable flesh-colored box, the screw that the company placed in the PlayMatez' hearts so they would wear down within five years or so, causing the customer to purchase replacements. Without the built-in obsolescence, the company's base of satisfied consumers would remain satisfied – there would be no reason for them to buy another PlayMate if their first continued to function – and the company would cease to turn a profit. Ten dollars extra it cost them, per model, to install the screw. Only in some models, the damaged, the body rejected the foreign object. It hadn't been programmed in, and therefore wasn't part of the system as the electronics knew it. They were unable to function properly even the five years it would take for the screw to come loose.

Some might say, I thought as I read over the text, that the damaged are the smart ones. They know something's the matter with their parts, and they won't pretend it isn't.

"Robin, how could they know?" Lachlan asked, popping the disc out of the computer's drive. "How possibly?" He downed another Pips. The empty bottle clinked on the concrete floor where we sat, the discs strewn about us like marbles.

"I wouldn't know," I said. I felt like I should apologize to him. But I also felt as if he too must have known that this was what we would find, and so part of me thought he'd been searching for it all along.

"The factual question is, how do I get it out of me?"

There's no way, I wanted to say. Once the skin is open, there's no way back.

"We could broadcast this. Maybe, once people see..." he said.

"Maybe," I said.

His eyes narrowed. "You think they already know?"

My hand rested on his shoulder. His eyes lacked the lively dart of human eyes. When he spoke, people knew that the number of things he said was exhaustible; he had only so many possible combinations of letters and numerals, only so many inflections. His wires would burn out, and there would be no grave for him. There would be no graves for any of them. Their graves would be the junkyard, and when the record

of our time was lost and all that remained was our bones, the damaged would have no names because they had no bones. Their parts would be melted down to make more things that people use to fill the empty spaces in their beds, their workrooms. I realized that Lachlan's skin was cold in my palm.

"We should tell them. We should try, at least."

There was a grin that I'd never seen on his face, wide-eyed and stupid. This, it seemed to say, was an entirely new kind of adventure. This could get us killed.

But I knew the truth: that he had watched too many movies on the YouChannels, too many thrillers where the consequences of corruption are always disastrous. I humored him, because I loved the grin. It reminded me of a grin I used to know. My own.

When we went to bed, he talked like he was on upper. As the night passed, his words warmed the room. I entered the space between dreams. His words made less sense.

"And then, of course, I said, why else would a door be like a cockatiel? And the chief said, cockatiels only take wing north in the evening. And I knew then of course, how could I not have, that the cockatiel was like a door in that it was also like a desk."

In my sleep I muttered, "What's a cockatiel?" It was a word I didn't know, and I was surprised he knew any word I didn't.

I waited for his answer, but all that came was silence. When I opened my eyes, he was gone. I wondered for a moment if I'd imagined him. Then I heard the noise in the bathroom, a clink, as if someone had dropped a pair of nail clippers into the sink.

I went to him. There was a window in the bathroom, and the street light shone across his naked body. I saw him barely lit in the mirror. His tattoo was glitching, the ocean seizing up. He stood at the sink, hands close to his face, and he appeared to be scraping something off the inner palm of his hand where his lifeline was. I was seized with the urge to know if his lifeline was truly as short as five years, tops, or if it stretched on, an illusion, if someone in the company thought of that; whether they made the line reflect the way things really were or the

way customers think they would like them to be.

I stepped up close to him, so close I could smell his clean skin, the slight musk of his underarms. They did a good job with the smell. I wanted to see his lifeline. I wanted to help him wash away whatever mark had found its way to mar that line. But when I was close enough to touch him I was close enough to see: a pair of scissors in the sink, a jagged hole the size of a button in his palm, and Lachlan tearing at the skin, pulling the wound bigger, until the whole of his palm was open.

I wanted to stop him, but I was caught by the beauty of that glowing blue wire in the dark, in the mirror. In his reflection, the light generated a shadow of his silhouette, but I couldn't focus on anything but how the beads of light blinked back at us in crisscrossing lines. They looked like elongated strands of the double helix.

"Am I a cockatiel?" he said. "Am I beautiful? Am I factual? Am I broken?"

These were riddles to which I had an answer.

"Am I beautiful?" he asked again. He looked into his damaged hand as the other hand grasped the wires inside. He tugged, and a wire snapped. His eyes in the mirror grew distant, colder than I'd seen them. I wrapped my arms around his chest and helped him pull the blue from his body. As we pulled, he wilted, until he was no more than synthetic skin and muscle on the floor. I peeled the skin away. I held his heart in my hands. The screw's pointed edge stuck out from the muscle, having finally worked its way through.

I never answered his riddles. The information I kept to myself, the discs I returned in a sealed baggie. I got out of that place, went to another city of grey where I got another job that followed me everywhere. I tried to avoid the cold. I left the damaged behind.

Bonnie Jo Stufflebeam lives in Texas with her husband and two literarily-named cats: Gimli and Don Quixote. Her fiction and poetry has appeared in magazines such as *Clarkesworld*, *Strange Horizons*, *Goblin Fruit* and *Daily Science Fiction*. She holds an MFA in Creative Writing from the University of Southern Maine's Stonecoast program and reviews short fiction at her blog, *Short Story Review*. You can visit her on Twitter @BonnieJoStuffle or through her website: www.bonniejostufflebeam.com.

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ILLUSTRATED BY RICHARD WAGNER

DAVID TALLERMAN BAD TIMES TO BE IN THE WRONG PLACE

DARLENE HAD BEEN SHOUTING THAT MORN-ing, and I guess I'd been shouting back, both of us going at it pretty hard.

It was all about the pickup, who got to drive and when. Or maybe it wasn't. Maybe it was about other things: money, and children, and forgiveness, and the way we didn't seem to have much of any of those, even after five hard years. But neither of us was going to make the other see sense with all that language passing back and forth. I grabbed my coat, shouted something mean and easy that I knew I'd regret later, and got out.

The forest smelled fresh, like new snow. It wasn't so far to the truck stop on the highway, not a bad hour's hike. Fall had ignored the warning signs that hemmed the national park and set the trees on fire, and it felt good to be out there, too good for anger.

That didn't mean I let it go. The best I could do was pack it deep down – something for later, for the next time. With Darlene and me there would always be a next time.

So I pocketed my anger like a dirty dollar bill and walked. The sun was bright but cold, as if it was dying but still trying its damndest. I kind of liked it that way. It made me think of hunting trips with my pa, before the cancer took

him, when things were simple and decisions were something older people made. I walked, breathed deep, and didn't think too much about Darlene, or the things she'd said that stung for being too near the truth.

When I got to the stop, it was all but empty. It was too late for breakfast, too early for the lunchtime trade, so there was just me and the sad-faced kid who serves when Judy's busy. I was stuck with the same dilemma; I'd eaten breakfast two hours ago, wouldn't want lunch any time soon. I settled on coffee, and picked a booth near the door. I sat staring into my cup, willing it to cool a little.

Both me and the kid looked round when a car pulled up. It had a well-maintained growl that told me it wasn't from anywhere nearby. Sure enough, when I glanced out the window there was a sleek estate pulled up beside the pumps, some foreign make I didn't recognise.

Two men stepped out on the near side. The driver was old, but well-preserved old, the only real telltale the grizzled beard lying past the collar of his white suit. The other wore a black shirt and silver-buckled black slacks that matched his goatee and slicked hair. Around the other side I thought I saw a little girl getting out, but when I looked again I realised it was a woman in her

early twenties. Something in the way she moved made me think of a flamenco dancer – somehow awkward and elegant at the same time.

As the two men came in, the one with the Johnny Cash getup was saying, “Is this really necessary?”

“I’d like a coffee. Is that all right?” White-suit sounded English, I thought at first. Then I corrected myself, *European*. But that wasn’t really it either.

“You know what I mean.”

“I’ve got my duty, bro, like you’ve got yours. You’d think by now you’d have learned a little patience. Also, I seem to remember the coffee here is pretty good. Am I right?” he said, speaking now to the zit-pocked teenager hovering behind the counter. Not waiting for an answer, he went on, “Make mine black, kiddo.”

“White,” said Johnny, “two sugars.”

The woman, who’d just come in behind them, added, “Can I get the same to go?” To the men she said, “If you two are arguing again I’ll wait outside.”

She spun on a heel and marched back out, the door jangling hard behind her. They took it in their stride, as though this sort of thing happened enough for them to expect it. White-suit took his coffee to a booth at the far end and sat down. His companion trailed after. The next time they spoke, they’d dropped their voices too low for me to hear.

I looked around instead. Sure enough, the woman was waiting outside, slouched against the tail of the car. She’d lit a cigarette and was just blowing a first plume of grey towards the glassy sky. Again, there was something in her pose – the tilt of her head, the way her forearm rested on the trunk – that struck me as very refined somehow. When she exhaled again I thought of smoke signals. At the same time, I remembered the last thing Darlene had shouted, and how scrambled and ugly her face had been while she said it.

I got up and grabbed her drink in its take-away cardboard cup from the counter, where the kid had left it while he hunted for something beneath the counter. Even as I shouldered through the double doors I had no clue what I meant to do, but there was a kind of relief in let-

ting the impulse drag me. It felt like letting out a breath I’d been holding for too long.

She looked older close up; a well maintained mid thirties, probably a little past my own age. It didn’t make her any less attractive. I held out the cup and said, “Thought you’d want this.”

She didn’t look surprised, although I could tell she’d realised I wasn’t an employee at the ‘stop. She took the cup and sat it on the roof of the car, then pulled a battered cigarette packet from a pocket and offered it – some foreign brand I didn’t recognise. I hardly ever smoke these days, but I still had my old Zippo in a pocket of my jacket, so I took one and lit it, telling myself it was to be polite.

“Those friends of yours, are they always like that?”

“They’re family. And yes, when my father and uncle work together they tend to fight.” She let the shrivelled remnant of her own cigarette drop and ground it neatly into the tarmac. “I suppose when people do a job for a long time they get into habits.”

“You’re here on work?”

“I’m just along for the ride. So is uncle, I suppose; he argues about it, and then insists on coming anyway. Father is the only one actually working.”

“So what does the old man do?”

She looked at me properly for the first time. Until then she’d been concentrating on her cigarette, or staring towards her own outstretched foot. Her glance weighed me up. No, it did more than that. I felt like an open book, except it was as if she’d skipped through the contents and gone straight to the index. It took her barely an instant, and then she looked away again. “He’s making sure it’s all here,” she said.

Still taken aback by that look, I asked, “All what? The diner?”

“All everything.”

I was starting to regret this conversation, attempted seduction or whatever the hell it was. Her voice had that same not-quite-European twang as her father’s. Probably she thought it was funny to be out here in the boondocks, with some redneck thinking he had so much as a chance with her. Probably she did this all the time. I wanted to say something clever or funny,

but all I came out with was, "Are you in property or something?"

She laughed. It wasn't a mean laugh, at least. "You wouldn't believe me."

"Try me."

"You know what? Fine. It's not as if it's a secret." Still, she only seemed half decided. She brushed a strand of dark hair out of her eyes, pulled out another cigarette and lit it. Even then, she took a couple of draws before she began again. "Have you ever worked around computers? Do you know what a backup is?"

"Sure." Darlene's father works for some blue-chip IT outfit down near California, and every Christmas – mainly to screw with the rube that wasn't good enough for his little princess – he'd bore me to tears with talk he knew I couldn't understand. I've a good memory, though; after the third time I started to keep up, and even join in a little, which wound him up no end.

With a sweep of her arm that took in the diner, the pumps, the highway curling towards the mountains one way and the city the other, the glossy crests of the pines beyond, even the crystal sky sharp above us, she said, "This is a backup."

I echoed her laugh with a nervous one of my own. "Right. Gotcha."

"A copy," she said. "For if the real one ever goes wrong. Father makes them. He makes sure they're all there. And, when they're finished with, uncle erases them."

"I don't get it." Truth was, I understood perfectly, but I didn't know what else to say. Was she joking? It didn't seem too funny. The worst part was, as soon as she'd said it I had this sense, like the things around me had grown suddenly thinner, like if I pushed too hard at the car door or the rusting phone booth or the sign by the slip road my fingers might just pass on through. Any other day I'd probably have just shrugged it off, but on this one, her words dug in like fishhooks.

"Well maybe you don't need to." She glanced over my shoulder, and added, "Hey, don't worry about it. You should just go back to your girlfriend and get on with your life."

So that was it, she was some crazy friend of Darlene's I'd never met. I almost sighed with relief. Instead, I laughed another awkward laugh,

and said, "Maybe you're right. Thanks for the smoke."

"Don't thank me. Those things will kill you." She didn't sound like she believed it.

I nodded, started back toward the diner. Half way there, I hesitated. I didn't want to ask, but I couldn't help it. "So how long do we get?"

She didn't even pause to consider. "A while," she said. "Not too long."

I passed the two men on the way in. They didn't look like guys who could make or break whole realities, but there did seem to be something about them – like they were a little clearer than everything around them. We exchanged a nod, and the one in the suit – who I figured, somehow, was her father – tipped an imaginary hat and said, "Time waits for no man."

When I sat back in my place I had just time enough to watch them climbing into the car. The woman getting in on the other side looked far too old to be the one I'd spoken to, older than either of the men, but by the time I'd seen her she was gone.

My coffee was lukewarm. I carried the cup to the counter, gave the kid a nod, and went out. I glanced both ways up the highway, but the car was nowhere to be seen.

I WAS HALF WAY BACK TO THE HOUSE WHEN

the jumble in my head, the anxious confused mood I'd been carrying around since that conversation, turned into something else. It was as if I'd climbed higher and suddenly I could see how all the things around me were really just one thing, one single scene.

It was a good feeling, and a little scary. It began with a single thought, as clear and bright as winter's first frost, and afterwards that thought kept batting back and forth, too big to shake itself loose.

Back home, the first thing I noticed was the pickup gone. Darlene would have gone to see one of her girlfriends in town. That would lead to drinking, and maybe she'd call to make up and see if I wanted to join her, but more likely she'd stumble in long after dark, set on finishing what we'd started that morning.

I went straight to find a piece of paper, as though the thought, so solid a moment ago, was

now something that might vanish if I didn't get it down. At the top, in big shaky letters, I wrote:

Darlene.

Then, like a gasp, came the thought:

Life is short.

I hoped there was something more behind this than what the crazy truck-stop woman had said – that it was an understanding I'd come to over years, a glacier of truth that had finally worked itself free of my ice-locked thoughts. That was how I felt. But in the end, did it matter much? I knew it was true. It didn't make any difference if the world was about to blink out, not really. Life was too short for two people to make each other miserable.

I wrote a little more, not much. I said I was going away for a while. I'd take what I needed and some money, and everything else was hers as far as I was concerned. I'd ring Jack sometime about quitting at the mill; if she saw him, she was welcome to tell him, and if he coughed up my back pay she could have that too.

I didn't say where I was going. I don't think I knew.

And I didn't write *I love you*. It was a lie, and I was done with those.

SO HOW LONG IS A WHILE?

I've been walking for about a month, I think – I haven't been bothering much with dates. If I had to say where I was going I'd mention my brother's down in Denver, but there's a long way between here and there, and I'm not hurrying. Sometimes I stop in a cheap motel. Sometimes I sleep rough. Sooner or later my money will run out, and maybe then I'll have to get some work, at least for a while. Not yet though, not right now. And who knows what tomorrow will bring?

One time I thought I saw that car go by. The side window was down, and her face was just visible, hair all tousled with the breeze. She didn't so much as look at me, and afterwards I wasn't sure. Still, I whispered a *thank you* under my breath.

Thanks for the warning. Thanks for the second chance.

How long is a while? Damned if I know.

But maybe, just maybe, it's enough.

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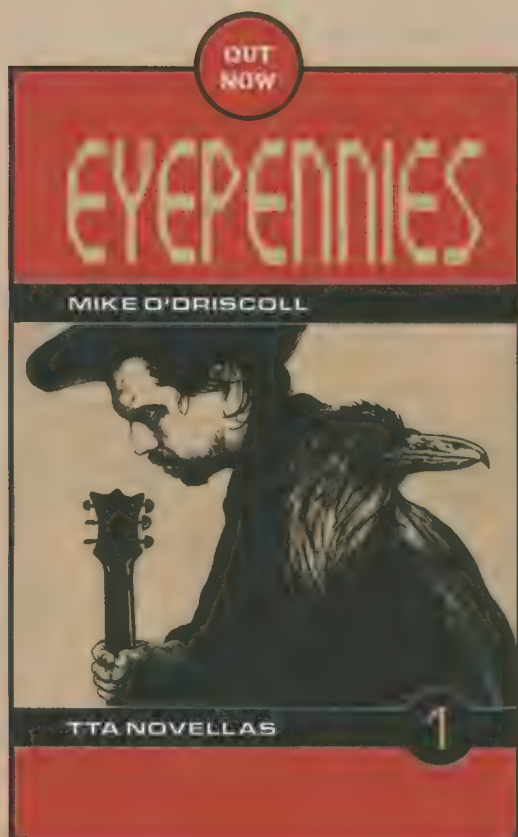
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THE LABYRINTH OF THORNS

The first thing you notice is the cold.

It isn't the wind that creeps up the very insides through into your bones. Not the bright fire of frost against your skin. The first is an evil, bottom of winter black firm, descending the fog that hangs motionless in moonlight. Still as a caught breath. You feel as though you could melt through it. Like cigarette smoke melts into wet air.

The darkness has sprung from the hard bodies of bare trees like a bubble, and the world seems to tip at the thought of it — leaving you clinging to the edges of the dark.

Everything behind is vertigo.

The path ahead is obvious.

Something living shifts in the undergrowth. Hot and vital. Nourished by the darkness and the fog. An owl screeches in the bare branches above — putting out a pair of claws, wings clattering in the branches. Feathers scatter the airspace of an invisible web, until it rains down around you.

Take a pair of broken glass.

That sound brings you back into yourself, staring at the young woman sitting on an empty packing crate in front of you. She has the sort of smile that it's easy, too easy, to trust. There's a teenage boy somewhere behind her, breaking out a window with his elbow. Feet pass by at eye-level, cutting the light into a low strobe. A ball of nausea gets tangled somewhere in your belly and edges up your spine, but you don't let the girl see it.

"How did it go?" she says. That same careless, easy smile.

The boy clears the last of the broken glass out with his sleeve, and looks out into the staccato pulse of passing feet. The heart of the city beating down here in the bowels of its body, barely three hundred feet above the sea. He has scars underneath the stubble around his mohawk, just as you have under your own untidy hair. Just like the girl across from you has underneath her carefully styled cornrows: a jagged hook of puckered, pink flesh slicing through the braid just above her right temple.

"Who's out there?" you ask the kid at the window.

He looks at you as though he'd like to leave your body in a gutter somewhere down in Pipe-town. An offering for the addicts and the damaged wrecks that people like you (like all of you) become when the implants imbedded in the soft dark of your brains begin to degrade and malfunction.

He turns his eyes on the girl.

"Are we done here?"

It isn't really a question.

You get your shit together and head out onto the Strip: where all the hustlers and conmen of the undercity come to get rich, and all the bored assholes in the uppercity go to get poor. The girl puts a hand on your arm and holds you in her eyes for a few short, vital moments before she pulls the hood up on her jacket and turns away into the crowd.

She is gone before you have the chance to think of what to say.

You walk...or climb...or crawl...into the forest. Sucking down lungfuls of the fog, and breathing out life. It courses through every part of you,

like stars scuttering through your capillaries. The moisture in the air tastes of leaf mulch, decay, and unturned earth. Ivy and Traveller's Joy twist themselves around the muscular lines of the forest, breaking up the hard edges wrought by moonlight. The black seedheads of clematis cluster in halos of white, cottony fleece. The undergrowth is wended through with thorns that catch against your body.

Ahead, the moonlight is brighter. Silver-blue and pooling in the clearing like still water. The brilliance of it pierces your skull. Cold condensation racing down the wires laced through the matter of your brain and bringing that same ball of nausea into the bottom of your belly. It feels like you are falling. Like you cannot help but fall...

You sit up, and swing your legs over the edge of your bed. Put your head into your hands, and rub your eyes until the darkness starts to swim. You hear the whir of the security drone long before its searchlight scrolls through the glass wall of your apartment and passes over you like a hand; it raises the hairs on the back of your skull, amongst the knotted scars.

Blue light thrums out of the drone in a sinus rhythm and the sirens howl through the metal of the city, rattling amongst the pipes and shaking water down from higher up in its superstructure. Then the drone plunges down into the streets below trailing its incessant scream behind it like the tail of a comet, and you let out the breath you didn't know that you were holding.

You walk to the windows, and wipe the condensation and flaking paint off the glass. It is late October, long into the time when the damp makes a home for itself in here for the winter. You thought this ramshackle greenhouse of an apartment was charming once, just after you'd made lieutenant and they'd moved you up out of the undercity. The landlady spun you some old yarn about how, when the city was still young, there had been a garden planted here that fed the people on the lower floors. Well, maybe that was true, but now the city sprawled out into the ocean for half a mile from here before it touched the sunlight, and the only thing that grows here is a stubborn black mould that you can never scrub out of the tiles in your bathroom. Now, the whole world stares in at you, like your head had been cracked open and everyone in the city gets

to have their turn picking through what's inside.

The tiny speaker implanted just behind your jawbone buzzes a low tone into your middle ear, and you raise a tired hand to pick up on the call – pressing two of your fingers down into the soft tissue until you can feel the slow churning of your pulse.

"Yeah?"

A woman's voice cuts through the white-noise of the drone's rotors, still swelling up from somewhere deep below.

"I need to see you."

She sounds pissed off. You feel the muscles of your jaw tighten like piano wire around your throat.

"Yes, sir," you tell her. "I'll be right there."

But she has already gone.

Your commander is a tiger sculpted into human form: all lean muscle and hard eyes. You meet her outside the doors of a club that's formed out of the same matter as she is: the bass pulse that reverberates inside your throat, a spray of hot blood, and the stink of death in the slick beer on the floor.

She takes you by the shoulder and leads you high into the upper balconies. The lighting rig hangs a hundred feet below the two of you, splashing its hot, white light over the crowd: tiny fragments of life that sway and twist their arms in drug-tranced shapes. She pushes you back against a sheet of dirty plexiglass that's all that stands between you and the long and lonely fall onto the dance floor. Her breath is on your skin. The bulk of her body between you and any chance of escape. That piano-wire-tightness creeps into your throat again. No matter how hard you try, you can never swallow it down.

"So?" she says.

Your fingers creep through the shallow gouges in the plastic sheet behind you, and you wonder how close it is to breaking.

"They asked me to network with them," you tell her. Your voice sounds half-choked out. Defeated. "They wanted to implant a memory. To show I can be trusted."

"And?"

You turn your head away, just so that you don't have to look into her eyes.

"I agreed," you say. "What else could I do?"

She jerks her chin once in something that is meant to be a nod.

"Is it useful?"

She means the memory. Of course she doesn't ask what it was like, or whether it has infected you like a sickness that makes you want to pry a crowbar between the plates of your skull. A thought that drains all other thoughts until they blanch into insignificance. She has no way of understanding. Soldiers like her are only ever given basic record-and-recall implants. Crude, unsophisticated cysts of tech that passively absorb the input from her eyes and ears. She's never known the orgasm of energy that passes through the brain when a network opens for you like an oyster, or the scrabbling fire of a virus that unpicks your body's ability to regulate its own temperature.

You sigh, and rub your eyes with the balls of your hands.

"I don't know," you tell her, frustrated. "It's too soon. I don't... I don't think that I even have access to it all yet."

The muscles of her jaw ripple with annoyance.

"Is it organic?" she asks. "Did it come from one of the Collective?"

You shake your head, no. "I think it's synthetic," you say. "Something that they've designed and engineered."

"To serve a purpose?"

You shrug, and fumble in the pocket of your jeans for a crumpled pack of cigarettes. You clench one between your bloodless lips, and try not to flinch away when your commander lights it for you.

"Maybe," you say. "I don't know... I just..."

Her hand falls on your shoulder, and the muscles there are all wound so tight that twinges of pain run up the side of your neck.

"You need to chill out, lieutenant," she tells you, as if that wasn't obvious. "You're the closest we've got to cracking the Collective for six months. If you fuck this up –"

"I won't fuck it up," you tell her through clenched teeth. "Sir."

"Make sure you don't," she says, squeezing your shoulder and turning away.

Her absence leaves you leaning back into the

plexiglass. It bows ever so slightly with your weight, and once again you feel like you are falling. The music pulses in your neck, and your commander looks back over her shoulder.

"Get yourself a drink, pop some, and get some rest," she says. "I'll be in touch in three days' time. Make sure you have something more to give me on these assholes when I do."

At the centre of the forest there is a clearing, and at the centre of the clearing there is the labyrinth. Its walls are tangled thorns, brown-dead and casting a filigree of shadows over moonlight. The night hangs in the windless dark. The only sound and movement comes from your own breath.

The entrance lies in front of you, and as you ease your way inside the thorns catch at your clothes – the dead and brittle branches creaking and snapping like old bones. The compulsion to move forwards gathers in your chest and wraps itself around your heart. You struggle against the thorns until they are knotted fast around you. In the end, you must sacrifice your coat to the labyrinth, and go on with the night air biting at your arms.

The stars wheel overhead, leaving glimmering snail's trails on the darkness. A thick wad of cold, wet leaves slithers under your bare feet. It smells of life and death and wilderness. A world away from the rancid pungency of rubbish rotting in the city's streets. It is different from everything you have ever felt before: a faint, electric thrill, like the poles of a low-voltage battery pressing into the soft flesh of your belly.

You wonder if this is what the real world is like, beyond the many-layered city and the thousand-mile ocean that surrounds it. Whether there is anywhere left in all the world as desperately alive as this. Beyond the grip of glass and concrete.

Frost prickles on your flushed-raw cheeks. You press a little further in.

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The protocol pierces your daydreams as you wend through the midcity, twisting past the crowds of people going to and from the Boardwalk. You dismiss it with a thought, and wonder what someone has to do to their brain to scrub the serial numbers from their implants. Maybe

the request came from one of the Degenerates: their tech too far gone to do anything but fire random, confused data and viruses out into the world around them. You glance around, but there are no tell-tale heaps of rags and flesh in doorways, muttering to themselves and begging for change. Trying to scrape together enough to buy whatever prescription or experimental opiates they can get their hands on. Anything to distract them from the fire burning out their brains that consumes their thoughts, their identity, their ability to function.

The meatheads of the city might feel pity or disgust, but the truth is that you find it hard to feel anything at all these days. You know it's only a matter of time before you end up the same way, and if you think of anything, then it's only to push aside the nagging anxiety that it's past the time that you should make some plans for when it does. After all, who else is going to make sure you don't end up down here? The company? Hell, all they care about is whether or not you stay lucid enough to try and sue them.

You bite down on your tongue, pull your hood up, and keep on walking. Your feet ache, but this far out into the edges of the city the wind blows in off of the Atlantic and fills your face with cold, salt air. It is the closest thing you have felt to living since the Collective stuffed the labyrinth into your brain. Truth be told, it is the closest you have felt to it in much, much longer.

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You swipe the thought away again, annoyed.

There is a sudden change in temperature when you pass out of the shadow of the city. You shiver, and push your hands deep into the pockets of your sweater. The Boardwalk is a half a mile of damp, salt-weathered wood clinging to the western edge of the city, projecting two hundred feet out over the sea. It is the closest that a city rat like you will ever get to touching the face of the real world, and every time it leaves you breathless with its light and colour. The movement between a patchwork of stormcloud and the clear sky. Needles of sunlight cutting through to spear the green water, radiating down into the depths.

Not today.

Today, the sky and water are silver-grey like old 8mm film. There is no colour or motion in it all, just a scraped-out, empty feeling that yawns in the pit of your stomach. Like you have mislaid something that you can't articulate, and you can't even say when you last knew where it was.

You look for the girl with the easy smile and the deep, brown eyes, and check the time and GPS data from your own internal readouts against the scrap of old-fashioned paper that she slipped underneath your door. Maybe she just left it there because she was sick of ignoring your messages and calls. Or perhaps the Collective have found out who you work for, and you're minutes away from a sharp shove in the back and a thousand foot fall into grey water. Either way, you wade through the milling crowds, the flashing arcade lights, and the blare of ugly music. Most of the people have come down here from the uppercity. A lot of them are with their children, and it's safe to guess a fair proportion of them work for the same company as you. You keep your head down, and try not to make eye contact.

By the time you reach the railing, fat flecks of Atlantic rain click against your shoulders and soak into the thin fleece of your sweater. The metal is cold underneath your hands. The paint is flaking, and you cling to it until the little shards of rust dig into your palms. Wait for that shove in the back, and to feel like you are falling.

It never comes.

Instead, you look down the Boardwalk to see the girl with the cornrows and the easy smile standing behind the railing maybe a couple of hundred feet from you: at the edge of a small pier, punctuated with a kiosk selling coloured sugar for the cost of two months' wages. She smiles at you, and places a tattered army boot carefully on the bottom rung of the railing.

You call out to her over the mechanical music of the arcades and the low server-humming of the crowd, but there is no way that you can reach her. All you can do is stand, frozen in place, and watch her skinny body tumble, end-over-end, into the empty void of air between the city and the sea. She grows smaller and smaller, until she's a wet rag bouncing off the great, rusting supports that hold the city up before she disappears into the white and churning water.

Someone on the pier screams.

You turn away. Tug the hood a little further down over your face. The last thing that you need is to still be here when the security forces arrive and start asking awkward questions.

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Maybe it's just that you've lived off nothing but coffee and cigarettes for weeks now: this lurching, unsteady feeling that's crept into your stomach. The irrational fear that the city's supports have rusted through. That the vast bulk of it – concrete and steel, filth and glass, rats and human detritus – teeters like an inverted pendulum above that endlessness of water.

For a second, you even think that you can feel its streets tip, sickening and uncertain, underneath your feet.

Cold, wet, and lost as a wad of autumn leaves, you drift down through the city like a corpse dumped into open water: hair and clothes billowing membranously in the hot, wet air that blows up from Pipetown. You take a crumpled surgical mask out of your pocket and hook the cheap elastic over your ears. Anything to stop the moisture and bacteria from getting down into your lungs.

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At the heart of the labyrinth there is a ruin. Once, it was some kind of church, although you don't know what kinds of gods would linger in this space between waking and sleeping. In the static between the layers of an artificial memory. Now all that's left is a chequerboard floor of black and white stone covered with umber leaves, and the west wall projecting up from a tangle of dead brambles and blackthorn, and paper-dry brown roses. It's stained glass engulfed in a halo of black thorns.

The moon is high and waxing full. Closer and more brilliant than you can ever remember seeing it before, on the nights when you've stood on the end of the Boardwalk and craned your head to watch it rise out of the ocean. You keep breathing cigar smoke out into the dark, where it unravels itself in lazy curls and coils.

The moonlight pours through the rose window high in the huge, broken tooth of wall. Fragments of painted glass jumbled together chaotically. Pointing inwards. Pointing outwards. The colours are inverted where the moonlight paints them on the floor. Red turns to green. Blue into citrus-peel and fire.

There is some sort of order to it all that feels just out of reach.

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The market just behind the entrance into Pipe-town is full of freaks and dropouts. People who have distilled down into the very bottom of the city and form a thick, black crust over its underbelly. The crowd hums between the stalls and thick, wet banks of fog. Laughter short and hard. Voices honed by anger. Coughing from the incessant damp and the first stages of Legionnaires' disease. Everything muffled behind masks and respirators. The traders burn incense and sell their cheap jackets and body jewellery, clams, seaweed, and plastic statues of Ganesha or Our Lady Guadalupe. Everything slick with moisture and gleaming in the hard, white light.

You tug at the zipper on your jacket. Keep your head down. You were born somewhere down here. Maybe in the adobe buildings plastered together from silt and desperation down by the docks, where people die in their hundreds every time that winter comes. Here in Pipetown, the city's hot water systems keep most of the cold out. Here it is summer, and disease, that people fear.

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Your fingers ache and bleed as you lever the black and white stones out of the chequerboard floor, right where the moonlight makes inverted reflections in the leaves. The slabs are heavy. Real. Your arms ache as you drag them aside and reveal the woven mat of dead, brown roots beneath. They tangle around your fingers like hair, shifting in the refracted, moonlight colours until it looks like they are growing around your hands, drawing you down into the earth.

When your fingers finally break through the thick swaddling of roots and humus, your whole

body shivers with the sudden cold of what's beneath. You stop, and dig more carefully, brushing the dirt away from the surface of the still, black water that reflects the full and perfect moon back up upon herself. A dry, dead leaf skitters across the surface of the pool: a tiny, skeleton thing that passes soundlessly over the obsidian mirror of water. Made to scry the faces of the dead.

You dip your hands into it, and cup it to your face. It's opaque and black as oil, but the taste of it is sharp and clean and cold. Nothing like the blood-warm, faintly saline water you are used to.

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The docks draw you to them by virtue of their emptiness. You pass through the shantytown around them like an autumn leaf ghosting through the rusting crates where the stevedores make their homes. The metal doors are open to let the evening in, and it fills the night with the smell of stale moonshine and the hot, sharp cries of children. The docklands stretch up into the city's superstructure and out towards the very edges of the world. Warehouse-sized cranes slide in and out of the floodlights, hauling containers off of whatever ship is docked against the support structure two hundred feet below.

Your mind slips into the sphere of the dock's network. It comes like a shiver on your skin. You can feel the endless complexity of the data shifting within it: cargo manifests and ship registration documents, everyone from the companies in the uppercity to undercity ganglords messing with the files and skimming a cut off of the top. There are nights that you have come down here just to plug your mind into it and watch the beautiful chaos of it all twisting through your thoughts, but tonight you brush it away as it reaches out to you, and slip into a narrow alleyway that cuts through the mile-wide circuit board of metal crates. Each one is stuffed to bursting with nappies and onions, scrap metal and reverse-osmosis coils for the water purifiers. The endless stream of pointless shit that this city needs to survive like a parasite on the rest of the world. Taking everything it can and turning out only filth in return. Filth, and people like you with heads packed full of rusting wire.

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The moon sings out like struck crystal over the ruins. Its reflection shivers as you dip your hands back into the water, kneeling at the centre of this halo of inverted light. The blackness takes your hands, and then your arms, all the way up to the elbows. You lean forwards, and reach a little further down.

Finally, your fingers brush on something real. Strong and supple as leather. About the size of a new-born child.

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A thousand miles of open sea stretch out from the cusp of the world you are standing on. The water is almost silent, almost invisible in the dark. Only revealed in fragments as the cranes behind you pass high and slow over the floodlights.

You have never noticed the unspeakable vastness of it all before. This endless, sprawling wilderness of ocean.

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Your hands close around whatever's under the dark water, and draw it towards the surface. It takes shape slowly, as though it is surfacing out of a dream.

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Beneath the toes of your boots, the city disappears. You can just make out the great, round edge of one of the support struts to your left. A huge tower of metal driving down into the nothingness.

The full moon hangs in the water, amongst tiny flecks of foam.

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The head is still cradled in your hands as it breaks the skin of the black water, surfacing out of the abyss. It is your own, you realise, or something like your own.

You run your thumbs through the matted tan-

gles of its hair, feeling for the tiny depressions over its temples. Over your own. The skin of its scalp is puckered with the cold, but your shaking fingers do not find the twisted knots of scar tissue there.

Its flesh is unbroken. Its mind whole, removed from the rest of the world. Your own thoughts strain and struggle to comprehend it.

And its eyes, when it opens them, are black as the water.

A NETWORKING REQUEST HAS BEEN RECEIVED FROM UNIT 00.000.000.00. GRANT ACCESS?

Yes.

YES!

GRANT ACCESS.

You fall.

And, as you do, your mind unfolds like the core of an exploding star.

Allegra Hawksmoor is an activist, writer, and an editor at *SteamPunk Magazine* and post-civilised retrofuturist project *Vagrants Among Ruins*. She maintains a blog at www.hawksmoorsbazaar.net. This is her first story in *Interzone*.

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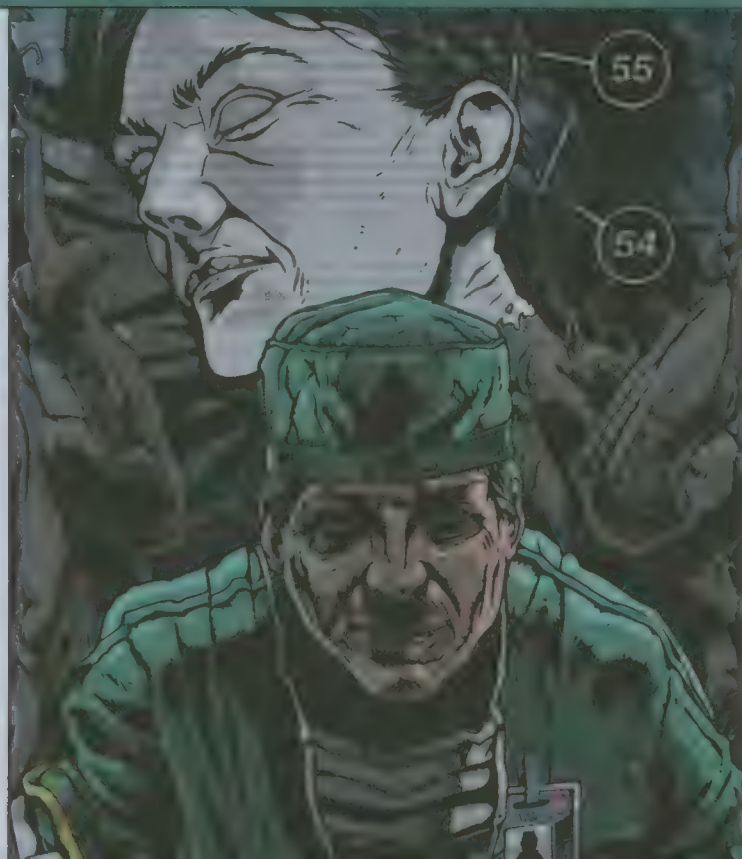
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CAROLINE M. YOACHIM

It was the most difficult surgery Takeshi Saito had ever performed. Not because of the operation itself, but because his wife, Laura, was the one on the surgical table with her skull cut open. He wanted to be in the room with her and hold her hand while he performed the operation. Foolishness. Laura wasn't here – her mind was stuck in the past. Extracting the memory unit from her brain was his last hope for finding her.

Beneath the Willow Branches, Beyond the Reach of Time



ILLUSTRATED BY MARTIN HANFORD



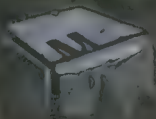
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He activated his surgical gloves, and a pair of robotic arms lowered. He stroked the side of Laura's head with a robotic finger, and the gloves sent sensory feedback to his fingertips. Around the incision, her hair was shaved to stubble, leaving tiny bumps like braille. He'd taken as little of her hair as possible, sterilizing the rest and pinning it down in tight braids.

With a tap of his foot, he swapped the robotic arms for a pair four orders of magnitude smaller. The image projected on the wall in front of him changed scale accordingly, displaying a small section of exposed cortex at high magnification. There were fifty-seven marker nodes embedded in the neural tissue. At this scale, they looked like giant silver sperm, swimming through the bare winter branches of neuronal trees. The memory unit itself wasn't visible. It was displaced along the z-axis of time, outside the plane of all possible timelines.

Takeshi reached for the first node, careful not to disturb the surrounding cells. As he pulled the node free, its tail tangled on a dendrite, and the delicate neuronal branch snapped. The destruction of one or even hundreds of neurons was a surgically acceptable loss, but Takeshi hated to make mistakes. Especially with Laura. He dropped the node into the collection tray and moved on to the next one. After every tenth node, the computer prompted him to take a break, but he extracted all fifty-seven nodes without rest.

Laura was disconnected from her memory unit.

The scale on the vid-wall reverted to one-to-one. Laura looked so vulnerable with her skull open. Had he looked so fragile when he was having his memory unit installed? Off in z-time, his memory unit recorded this moment, keeping his memories safe so he could access them if he found a way to go back in time and rescue Laura.

Takeshi gestured with his foot and his fingertips tingled, a false sensation he'd programmed into the gloves as a signal that the robotic arms were moving through time as well as space. He scooped up the marker nodes and traced the wires past the point where they disappeared. Once he had a fix on the memory unit, he pulled, bringing it back into the timeline. On

the wall display, it looked as though the unit had appeared out of nowhere, a nondescript metal case with a bundle of wires trailing from one corner.

He shut off the z-manipulator. When his fingertips stopped tingling, he gently closed Laura's skull and stitched her scalp together. He prayed that the memory unit wasn't damaged, that it had recorded something useful. He prayed for answers because it hurt too much to pray for Laura.

TAKESHI DELIVERED THE memory unit to his research assistant, Fujiko, and went to Laura's recovery room.

"I found you some new artwork." He could not help but speak, even though he knew Laura didn't hear him. "I've been saving it for after the surgery."

He reprogrammed the walls to display a scene from Green Willow – two willow trees with their trunks and branches twined together, done in the style of Utagawa Hiroshige's nineteenth century paintings. Green Willow was Laura's favorite story. Her mother read it to her as a bedtime story after her father died. It had been a difficult time for her, growing up on an American army base alone with her Japanese mother. Takeshi told her the story almost every time he came to visit, in hopes that the familiar tale would comfort her.

"Once there was a samurai who loved all of nature, and especially loved trees," he began. He told Laura how the samurai was sent on a mission for his lord, and that on the way he met a beautiful woman whose house had a willow tree in the yard. The woman was Green Willow, and the samurai fell in love with her. He abandoned his mission and took her to a distant city outside the realm of his lord. They lived there happily, until one summer's night when Green Willow cried out in pain.

"My willow, they're cutting it," she said. "I'm sorry I took you from your duty, but I love you." Before the samurai could speak, his Green Willow had disappeared, leaving only a bundle of willow branches.

The samurai returned to the house where he had found Green Willow, and the servants of the

samurai's lord had cut down her willow tree. The samurai knelt beside the stump and prayed, and all through the fall and winter he waited. In the spring, a sapling grew from the willow stump. When the wind blew at night, the leaves whispered, "Green Willow." The samurai tended her tree for all his life, then lay down beside it to die. And where his bones rested in the earth, a new sapling grew.

"His tree grew tall and strong beside hers," Takeshi said, "So close that their branches and trunks twined together, and two became one."

Takeshi held Laura's hand and stared at the willows on her wall. The trees evoked bittersweet memories of the times they'd walked together along the canal in Gion. Willow trees lined both sides of the canal, their trunks gnarled and thick, a striking contrast to the delicate branches that rustled in the wind. They'd gone walking there a couple weeks before her accident. She had talked him into dancing in the middle of the path, as though they were lovestruck teenagers instead of stodgy old professors. Back then he'd never noticed her crow's feet or the tiny strands of silver in her hair.

He noticed now that the nurses had undone her braids, leaving her hair sprayed out in all directions over her pillow. Black on white, like an ink blot. He ran his fingers between the strands, arranging it carefully to conceal the areas that were shaved.

"Don't worry, love," he told her, kissing her forehead, "I'll find you."

.....
TAKESHI SCROLLED THROUGH Fujiko's analysis of the memory unit. Laura was stuck in a loop.

"Her program was supposed to send her back three weeks," Fujiko said, "but what Laura built isn't really a time machine at all, it's more like a mirror that reverses the direction of her consciousness. Laura lived those three weeks moving forwards in time, and now she experiences those same events backwards then forwards, backwards then forwards. Always looping and always the same."

Takeshi traced the lines on his palm, as if by doing so he could somehow change the lines of time. "A loop like that shouldn't be possible.

Changing the past generates an alternate timeline."

Fujiko shrugged. "Maybe reversing the direction of our awareness doesn't constitute a change."

"I have to save her. I'll go back and destroy the machine before she uses it." It was the only option left.

"You can't," Fujiko said. She paced along the back wall of his office, too agitated to stand still. "Even if you sent your consciousness back, how would you make changes? The past is fixed. You can't save her. Don't you see why you can't?"

Takeshi shook his head. "I can pull things out of the timeline, along the z-axis. When I'm far enough back, I'll tear the machine apart. I'll pull every single piece of it out of existence if I have to. Without the time machine, Laura won't go backwards, so she won't get stuck in a loop. The changes will split off alternate timelines where she'll be saved..." His voice trailed off as he thought about all the things he needed to do to prepare.

"The cognitive data on Laura's memory unit degrades with every cycle," Fujiko said, staring at the floor. "I wasn't going to tell you because there isn't anything we can do about it. She could be aging and getting senile, or she might be going crazy -"

"It doesn't matter."

"What happened to Laura will happen to you too," Fujiko insisted. "People aren't meant to go backwards."

Takeshi folded his arms across his chest. "*It doesn't matter.*"

Fujiko lifted her gaze to meet his. "You can't work the machine by yourself, and I won't send you."

Takeshi smiled sadly. He knew this was a terrible thing to ask of Fujiko, but he had no other choice. No one else knew the equipment as well as she did. He had to make her understand. "My consciousness is in the present, but my heart is in the past, with Laura. Would you really keep us apart?"

"But you'll be stuck back there," Fujiko said, "looping through time."

"No," Takeshi answered. "We'll remove the second part of the program. I only need to go backwards to save her."

THE COLD METAL of the table pressed into Takeshi's back as he waited for the flip. The last thing he'd done before coming to the lab was to visit Laura. He'd held her hand and told her stories, his voice dry and soft like the rustling of leaves in the wind. Saying "the end" was the closest he could manage to saying goodbye. It wasn't really goodbye anyway. He would see her soon, moving backwards.

"Time manipulation in progress" marched around the periphery of the room, written in red at the top of the wall. His heart rate sped up.

Fujiko watched him via a video recorder in the ceiling. Any time up until the flip, he could call it off. All he had to do was cross his arms in an X above his head, and she would abort. He lifted his arm slightly, then set it back down. There was no reason to stall. He was as ready now as he would ever be.

The red lights shut off, plunging him into darkness. He could still signal Fujiko; the recorder on the ceiling picked up infrared. Had the flip happened? He didn't feel any different. Perhaps the change was subtle. Maybe he wouldn't become aware that he was moving backwards until he got some sort of environmental cue –

Pressure built in his head, as though his brain was a washcloth being wrung out over the sink. His chest rose and fell, but the rhythm was off – the inhalations were too long, the exhalations too quick. He tried to take a deep breath, but nothing changed. He'd lost agency. There was no way to shut his eyes against the darkness, no way to swallow hard, no way to slow his heartbeat.

He could count. Numbers didn't change, and he could still think. One. Two. Three. He tried not to notice the body that was no longer his. Four. Five. He felt the cool metal table pressing up against his back. The sensation was constant, the same uncomfortable stiffness both forward and back. Six. Seven. Eight. Nine. Ten. His mind was intact, this was how things were supposed to be.

The red lights came on, flashing their text so bright it should have made his dark-adapted eyes squint, but didn't. "Time manipulation in progress" scrolled along the top edge of the wall. Takeshi tried to remember which direction the text had moved, but he hadn't been paying at-

tention. Or had his memory unit failed? Without the memory unit, he would lose the future as time undid the connections in his brain. He tried to close his eyes and failed. His arm lifted slightly. The sudden motion caught him by surprise. He had to think, all he had was thought. What would be a test of the memory unit? He had to remember something that had happened right before the flip. His arm, he moved his arm. He remembered the event happening twice, once where he moved the arm, and once where the arm moved on its own. Once forward, once backwards. The memory unit was functioning. It was okay. He was okay.

Takeshi had made an effort to lay down slowly. He had paused between each motion. He remembered being frustrated at the delay, impatient. He'd been excited, and his body had wanted to rush. Now, in reverse, he felt the rush he had wanted before. Each motion was foreign to him, and his mind struggled to parse the sensations into meaningful actions. Laying down in reverse was different than sitting up. The motion was wrong, quick, as though his muscles were strung too tight. He relabeled his new actions – unlaying, unsitting, unwalking. The toes of his left foot reached back to the ground behind him, and his weight rolled onto his heel. His right foot lifted and swung behind him. Toes to heels, backwards, unable to turn his head and see where he was going. His body carried him through the doorway of the time-manipulation room and into the hall. He felt like he might collide with a wall at any moment.

At the end of the hallway, Fujiko hurtled towards him. She was looking the other way. At the last moment, she twirled to face him.

"nas-otiaS ,kcul dooG"

She inhaled the words, swallowed them. Then their eyes met for a moment and everything was still. He felt connected to the world. He opened his mouth to speak, but nothing happened. His illusion of agency was lost once more, and all too soon he was moving backwards, trudging into the past one step at a time. How could he have condemned himself to this? He should have crossed his arms over his head before the flip. He should have crossed them then, because he couldn't control them now.



SIX HOURS AFTER the flip, Takeshi was in the bathroom of his apartment, reabsorbing his own piss. The stream came up out of the bowl, separating neatly from the rest of the water before making its way back up into his kidneys. He felt the urge to shake himself, as though it would help to get the last drops back in.

The first day was almost over, it was early morning now, and soon his alarm would go off and he would go to sleep. Many things were still strange, but he was getting used to the most basic of backwards activities.

His body backed out of the bathroom, and he unstood onto his side of the futon. He smacked the top of the alarm to start it beeping. Then the sheets came up to cover him, the alarm stopped

beeping, and he was instantly asleep. Well, the forward moving consciousness that controlled his body had gone to sleep. Linked to the memory unit off in z-time, Takeshi felt the pull of a tired body, but he fought it off and remained awake. It felt good to have even this little bit of control, a glorious...disorientation. No, that wasn't the word. Disable, distraction, disaster? Disobedience. A glorious disobedience, like the times he had stayed up past his bedtime as a child, reading old issues of *KoroKoro Comic* with a flashlight underneath the sheets.

This would be a good moment to test his ability to manipulate the timeline. His hand was clutching the quilt; he could pull it out of existence, then bring it back. His forward-moving

consciousness wouldn't notice, and even if he did, it would be nothing more than a strange dream. Takeshi focused on the wires that connected him to his memory unit. He had altered them to provide sensory information, much like the tingle he got from his surgical gloves when he worked with the z-manipulator. He could feel the direction of the wires, as though his head had grown a tingly tail leading off in a direction that was outside of space. Using the wires as a guide, he pulled the quilt up and away from the plane of possible timelines, only a few – meters? minutes? Takeshi had no units of distance for the direction he pulled the quilt.

The room was dark –

Dark.

He'd opened his eyes.

Takeshi stood up, and his body responded. This was not supposed to happen. He had meant to remove only the quilt, but in doing so, he had pulled himself out as well. He looked down at his futon, he saw that the quilt was out of focus. Several iterations of the covers occupied overlapping sections of space, but at different times. Laura had made the quilt. She'd sewn it by hand after her miscarriage, using fabric from the baby clothes they'd bought. Each square had an origami crane. A thousand paper cranes were supposed to grant a wish, and though Laura never said so, Takeshi thought that the quilt might have been her wish for another child.

He accessed the diagnostics on his memory unit and was shocked to see how much the power reserves had dropped. He tried not to panic. He clutched the quilt tight in his hand and let his memory unit guide him back, retracing the path he'd taken to leave his timeline. Back into the sleeping body he could not control.

He would have to stay in the timeline and reserve his energy for saving Laura. Then, when he was far enough back, he would pull himself out of the timeline while holding some part of the machine.

.....
MONTHS PASSED, AND Takeshi drifted. His favorite times were when he visited Laura.

She looked the same, forwards and backwards, as she slept on her hospital bed. No, Takeshi thought, slept was not the right word. Words

escaped him. He could look up what he meant to think on his...on his what? There was some other part of his brain that could tell him things. A memory unit. But then he'd have to take his attention away from her, if only for a moment. His hands were in her hair, moving up from the tips toward her scalp, tangling the dark strands. Laura would hate that. He wished he could stop. Her hair had been so pretty when he'd come in. It took him several minutes to get his hands under control. Laura's hair was a mess, and he wanted to fix it, but at least he wasn't making it worse any more.

Why was she still sleeping? Sleeping was not the right word. Something was wrong with him. He was forgetting things that were important, there was something he was supposed to do, something soon, and he couldn't remember what it was.

His body started saying something. He listened. Some distant part of his brain flipped the words for him so he could understand. He was grateful. The other part of his brain was very kind, so nice to him. He was telling Laura a story. This was much better than messing up her hair. She liked stories. This one was about Green Willow, which was her favorite.

It began with two willow trees, old and gnarled, growing so close together that they tangled into just one tree. There were pictures like that on her hospital walls. How strange, that the story and the hospital would match. He wondered if that was on purpose, or by accident.

Accident. Something had happened to Laura, and he had to save her.

The samurai turned into a willow. Takeshi tried to focus. The other tree turned into a stump, with a little sapling growing out of it. Someone had cut down Green Willow's tree. Laura's tree. The story wasn't working, he was telling it wrong, but his voice kept going, swallowing more and more words. The samurai lived beside Laura's stump for a while, but then he left. Wrong wrong wrong. He shouldn't leave his Laura. But when the samurai left, he traveled to another place, and his Laura was there – not as a tree but as a woman. Back at the place where the story had started, someone had uncut her stump into a tree, which made her into a woman again.

He and Laura were together in the story, the samurai with his Green Willow. He listened to the part where the lovers were together, and then he stopped paying attention. He had heard the best part, the part where they were together and happy. This Laura, the real-on-the-bed Laura, would wake up soon, and then they would be together and happy too.

.....
TAKESHI WASN'T THERE when Laura woke up. It didn't matter. She was awake now. He was with her in the lab, helping her make changes to her time machine. She seemed quieter than usual, not chattering away like he remembered she always did, but instead saying very few words and stopping her work frequently to kiss his cheek or put her hand on his shoulder. She was so affectionate. He liked that. She was probably being quieter because she had just woken up. She'd been asleep for a long time, and she wasn't a morning person.

She asked him to push aside the energy cells so that she could reach some components further back in the machine. He grabbed them and pulled them out of her way. Pulling the machine. He was pulling a piece of the machine. This was important. Laura was awake, but maybe she wouldn't mind if he slipped off for just a moment to the other part of his brain. He rummaged around inside his head. He had been better at this before, better at finding what he was looking for in the external memory unit. Things began to come clear. The memory unit was off along the z-axis. It had the energy to pull what he was holding off into z-time.

He was holding a component from the machine.

With the memory unit to guide him, Takeshi pulled his body out of the timeline. It was like sucking the consciousness out of his body with a straw, except that his consciousness stuck to his body, and his body stuck to the energy cells, and the energy cells stuck to the wires that connected them to the time machine. His pull wasn't strong enough to bring the machine, so half the wires came with the energy cells and half the wires stayed. They looked like the tails of sperm, trailing off into nothing. Like the nodes embedded in his brain. He stared down at the energy cells

in his hand. They would still work, he realized. Even z-displaced. After all, his memory unit still worked.

Laura was next to him, but she wasn't moving. Had she gone to sleep again? Takeshi hoped not. She slept for a long time; she should be well rested. She must still be working on the time machine, he decided. He remembered the cells in his hand. But what could he do? He wanted to throw the energy cells against the wall and smash them.

They crashed against the wall. Startled, he backed away, tripping over his own feet and falling to the floor. He picked up the energy cells. They weren't damaged by the impact with the wall, they were very sturdy. But he could disconnect the wires. He pulled each connection loose, using his teeth to sever a connection that had gotten stuck.

He had changed the timeline. He looked for the split. He could see Laura, still working on the machine. She didn't move, but when he looked at her he could see her go to sleep. Not sleeping, comatose. Laura went comatose. It happened twice – once close, and once farther ahead. He could see the two timelines diverge, but they collapsed back together. The energy cells hadn't been enough, it hadn't saved her. But he knew what he had to do now, his mind was coming clearer. He would make other changes, as many changes as it took to save his Laura.

.....
NOTHING WORKED. **TAKESHI** had taken everything he could lay his hands on, and no matter what he changed, he couldn't create a timeline where Laura didn't go to sleep. He had to save her, not from the sleeping, but from something far worse, something he didn't understand anymore. He felt like there wasn't much time, and his memory unit was running out of power. He wished he remembered how the memory unit worked well enough to attach the energy cells he'd taken from Laura's time machine. If he could find them. He was losing things, losing everything. Everything but Laura.

He waited for her on a bench beside their favorite canal in Gion. The water was lined on both sides with willow trees, and it was their favorite place for walks. In a gap between the

branches, Takeshi could see herons regurgitating fish and releasing them into the canal. Laura came towards him backwards, without looking, but somehow knowing just where to find him. The tips of her toes peeked out from under the hem of her skirt as she spun to face him. No one on the path noticed it, except for him. If he could move his mouth, he would have smiled. He had forgotten how much she liked to walk barefoot.

Takeshi told Laura that he would stay here a bit and watch the herons fishing. She said she had to go back to the lab, which meant that she had come from there.

He unsat from his bench, and they held hands and walked backwards along the path next to the canal. He listened to her voice, soft and sweet, and since it seemed like this was a particularly nice moment, he got the other part of his brain to flip the words so he could pay better attention to his Laura.

"You have to live with an open heart, so that when something unexpected and wonderful happens, you notice," she said. "Sometimes the best science comes from the unexpected results."

Takeshi was disappointed. He'd thought, from the tone of her voice, that she was saying something more romantic. "My best science comes from carefully controlled experiments."

"You can't always plan and predict and study."

They were so different, he and Laura. He liked to plan and predict and study. He'd had a plan, before, to come back and save her. He frowned. The plan wasn't working. No matter what he did, he couldn't save her, because she was so determined to go to sleep. They kept talking, but Takeshi stopped listening. Reconstructing the conversation was too much work.

Laura twirled around, dancing for a moment by herself before spinning into his arms so they could dance together. Other people smiled as they passed. Laura was spinning, trapped in this dance, looping round and round. He held her close, feeling the warmth of her body against his.

He held her.

That was it. That was how he could save her. He pulled himself along the invisible wires that stretched out into the z-axis of time, and he pulled her with him. Everything was still. People walking on the path beside them froze mid-step,

and the willow branches stopped rustling in the wind. Laura leaned against his shoulder, her hand still clasped in his.

"Laura," he said.

She didn't answer. He panicked. What if he had brought only her body, what if her mind was lost somewhere? He pulled Laura close and squeezed her tight. She was sobbing. Sobbing. It was okay. She was here, and he could comfort her.

She pulled away, just far enough to look at him. Her eyes were wide and frightened and filled with tears.

"Takeshi," she said. "Takeshi."

Her body rocked forwards and back, a light sway on her feet that pulled her towards his chest and then back against the support of his arms.

"I'm here, it's okay," he said. "You aren't trapped any more. We're outside of time now."

He waved his hand, unable to explain. He'd known how this had worked, once, and so had she, but thinking about it now only made him confused. At least Laura wasn't sleeping. She knew his name, and he could hold her.

"You have to live with an open heart," she said.

They were the same words she'd said a moment ago. Maybe the words in her loop were the only words she remembered now. Still, they were the right words. Takeshi protected himself by planning, by thinking, by keeping his heart behind high walls. But he had let down his guard for this unpredictable woman who danced beneath the willows.

Laura leaned against his shoulder and let him stroke her hair. He kissed her forehead, then kissed the crow's feet at the corners of her eyes. He slipped his hand under the back of her shirt, and she pulled away, her eyes darting to the people standing frozen around them on the path. They couldn't see anything, but there was no harm in hiding. He led Laura to one of the willow trees, and they slipped between branches that hung down like a stone curtain. There were no other people here. There was only sunlight filtered through delicate green leaves, and the static ripples of the canal, water frozen in time.

"Better?" he asked.

She nodded. He pulled her shirt over her head and cast it aside, then threw his own onto the

ground beside it. She knelt and smoothed them flat, then added all the rest of their clothes to make a soft little nest beneath the branches. They lay down together and tangled into each other, like the willow trees in her favorite story, so close that they were one.

Takeshi held her close when they were finished, and pulled along his wires, taking them further out than he had ever gone before. They moved beyond his memory unit, and for a moment they saw it, a little metal box with wires that trailed up into his head. Their momentum carried them onward, and he made no move to stop. The tree above them was a sapling and a tree and a rotting log all at once, and every drop of water in the canal was a cloud and a raindrop and an ocean. Something snapped at the back of his head, and something went missing, something that had been a part of him for a long time. But Laura was pressed up against his chest, smiling as she watched all the wonders of the world unfolding. There was nothing missing, everything was here

and now, in this moment that encompassed all of time.

They drifted further and further. Takeshi saw all the timelines where Laura went to sleep and never woke up. He couldn't save them, those infinite Lauras, but he had saved one. His one Laura. Everything that was and would be, and everything that wasn't, but could be – it all stretched out below them as though they looked upon the world from very far away. But they hadn't moved, and the willow branches still covered them. They saw the universe in every willow leaf, and they fell, tangled together, beyond the reach of time.

Caroline M. Yoachim is a writer and photographer living in Seattle. She is a Clarion West graduate and was nominated for a Nebula Award for her novelette 'Stone Wall Truth'. Her fiction has appeared in *Asimov's*, *Lightspeed*, *Daily Science Fiction*, and once before in *Interzone* with 'The Philosophy of Ships' which was reprinted in *The Year's Best Science Fiction & Fantasy*. For more about Caroline, check out her website at carolineyoachim.com.

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Ben pressed his forehead and palms against the cold glass of the picture window. Twenty-three floors below, ice floes clogged the Moskva, bumping for position in the sluggish current. On the opposite bank, walkers bundled against the weather followed a towpath along the curve of river. The path skirted the park and disappeared under the covered span of the Pushkinsky pedestrian bridge.

Without turning away, Ben said to his wife, "Myra, look at this view." But she had already carried her things into the bedroom. Under his breath, Ben added, "*Derevo, derev'ya.*"

ILLUSTRATED BY RICHARD WAGNER

Ben knew only as much Russian as he'd been able to teach himself in the six weeks since Myra had assented to his accompanying her on this trip. He'd studied diligently, filling a notebook with conversational phrases and simple sentences. He'd conjugated verbs in the shower. He'd tried a few times to get Myra to work with him, but she didn't have the patience.

Ben's admiration moved past the brash-choked Moskva, past the park and its fringe of dreary tenement blocks, past the factory smokestacks and on to where Moscow crowded the middle distance with gray buildings and bare trees. Here and there, tower cranes poised over unfinished structures of glass and steel.

"You can see the Kremlin wall from here," Ben called over his shoulder.

"I can't find my phone," Myra said. Crossing

the room behind him, she unzipped his carry-on and laptop case.

Ben turned and raised his camera. "*Zhena*," he mouthed to himself. Through the viewfinder, he watched her de-stuffing his things. "It's not in there," he said. "Maybe you left it on the plane."

"I didn't leave it on the plane, Ben."

He took her picture. "*Fotka...*"

At the click, she looked up at him. "You could help."

Ben turned back to the window and centered the sprawl of Moscow in the camera's small screen. "You'll find it," he said. Then snapped the picture.

Their suite comprised two rooms and a kitchenette, all painted a shade of blue Ben called 'dark' and Myra called 'Egyptian'. In the sitting



room was a paisley sofa, a desk and a small television on a stand. A rug of complex patterns hung from the wall, and a doorless arch separated the rooms.

Ben said, "The view's great. Let's go eat."

"I need to work," Myra said.

"You still have to eat."

"You didn't have to come," Myra reminded him. "You knew I'd be busy."

Ben couldn't argue that; her priorities had been made clear to him well in advance. But he hated to eat alone. He fiddled with the hotel key and looked at the door.

"Go," Myra told him. "Get food. Bring something back."

So Ben rode the elevator to the lobby alone. He zipped up his coat ("*pal'to...kholodno*") as he pushed through the revolving door and into the evening. "*Dobryi vecher*," he said to the people he passed on Pushkinsky Prospekt. Not far up the street he found a grocery, where he filled a bag with things that wouldn't need cooking. He carefully pronounced the words on each of the labels.

"You know I hate sardines," Myra said when he returned to reveal his haul.

"They're for me."

"Well, what's for me?"

He proudly showed her the bread, cheese and packaged meat, the strawberry cakes and the pears. "*Pitanie*," he declared.

Except for the pears, it was all a disappointment to her.

That night, Myra sat in the center of the bed tapping out a stream of emails on her laptop. Ben sat on the sofa with his laptop reviewing the pictures he'd taken so far to document their journey.

The chronicle began at Baltimore Washington International: Myra dragging her suitcase through the parking garage under the orange glow of tube lights; Myra riding an escalator up into the echoing terminal; Myra at the gate. Boarding the plane, he'd taken one blurred shot past the back of Myra's head and down the aisle, unamused faces to either side. That image, for Ben, encapsulated the torment and boredom of their ten-hour flight. Then suddenly Moscow; and Myra again, digging through the pockets of his bag for a lost (then found) phone.

Ben stopped at the picture he'd taken out the

window, his attention arrested by something he'd not seen before. He leaned forward and tilted the screen for better light. A few swift taps to enlarge and pan, then – there, a tower nearly hidden in the sprawl. At its peak, an open rotunda encircled by pillars and capped with a dome. Only the rotunda and a few floors beneath were visible, the rest being blocked by more modern structures. It looked like something that might have been – or still be – attached to a mosque. Ben squinted into the glow of his screen. Between the pillars he could just make out what seemed to be tattered black sheeting either hanging from the ceiling beneath the dome or draped over something large, possibly both. The details were obscured by distance.

Ben carried his laptop to the window and opened the drapes. Comparing the nighttime Moscow skyline with the image on his screen gained him nothing. The space where he thought the tower should be was unlit.

Myra appeared under the arch. "What are you doing?"

"Looking for something."

"Can you do it without the light? I'm going to bed."

Ben shut his laptop and set it on the desk, then followed Myra into the bedroom. No sooner had he stretched out next to her than she kicked at the covers in frustration. "This bed is way too small," she said.

Claiming only his pillow, Ben quit to the sofa.

.....
It was dawn by the time he slept, noon when he finally woke, and then only because Myra slammed the door leaving. She returned shortly after he'd emerged from the shower, while he was still rooting through the kitchenette looking for something with which to make coffee. She was finishing a conversation on her phone.

"We'll talk later." Her eyes flicked to Ben, then away. "You, too," she said, then snapped the phone shut and handed Ben a large, lidded cup.

"Coffee?" he asked, removing the lid to sniff.

"Tea. I can share. And milk, too." She took a pint carton from a paper bag and set it on the counter.

"Who was that?"

"Are we still having lunch today?"

"Why wouldn't we?"

"You slept a long time."

Ben found a cupboard with a few dainty tea-cups, and was very aware of her watching as he poured for both of them. He peeled open the milk carton, sniffed and grimaced. "That's not milk." He passed it to her for verification.

"Sour," she said.

Ben took his teacup to the window. The temperature had plummeted overnight, and the trees in the park looked ready to shatter. In the full light of day, the unfamiliar tower from his picture seemed less enigmatic than it had the previous night. Though its base was lost in a cluster of surrounding buildings, Ben imagined hefty balustrades and a vaulted entrance. In the open rotunda, the black sheeting had either been taken down or blown away.

"Did you see this?" Ben said. When Myra didn't answer, he looked back to see her still watching him. He gestured out the window with his cup. "Did you?"

"Did I what?"

Ben flipped open his laptop and keyed it on. While waiting, he nodded out the window again. "That tower. There was something up there yesterday." He leaned over the desk and called up the picture with the tower, then slid the laptop around to face her. Myra hadn't moved, and didn't look. He identified the tower on his screen. "Right there."

She sipped her tea.

"You don't care," Ben realized, turning the laptop back to himself.

"What exactly am I supposed to care about, Ben?"

"I didn't see that tower yesterday."

Until the words had been spoken he hadn't realized why the tower bothered him. He'd absorbed their view from the window yesterday; he'd seen the domes of the Kremlin, the red wall, the bare trees. Farther out, he'd noted the tower cranes and the factories. He had not seen the tower.

"What is that building?" he asked.

Myra, who had come to look over his shoulder, pointed at another building. "What's that one? Or that one?" Her nail clicked on the screen. "What's *that* one?"

Ben looked at her. "Why are you mad?"

"It's just a building."

"I didn't see it yesterday."

"We just got here, Ben. There's a lot you haven't seen."

"Okay," Ben said. He closed the cover of his laptop. "Forget it." Turning from her and the window, he picked the camera off the desk and dropped into the sofa. Myra went downstairs for more tea and didn't return until twenty minutes later, empty-handed, only to say, "I got called in."

"It's Sunday," Ben protested.

But she was already pulling on her coat, zipping up. Only after she'd tugged her gloves on did she stop to look at him. "I might miss dinner," she said, then closed the door behind her.

In the faint cloud of perfume left in her wake, Ben contemplated the camera. After cleaning the lens with the corner of his shirt he set it aside and went to the kitchenette to see if she'd left any tea. She hadn't. Instead, he found a receipt with a Moscow address written in her hand. He took it and went to stare out the window. The pale tower, so out of place among the steel and glass, seemed to have grown closer, or taller. Ben couldn't tell which.

Myra did miss dinner. It was after 2:00 am when Ben, lying under the bed's thin quilt, heard the door open. He listened to the domestic sounds of homecoming making their way through the suite: jangling keys, shed coat, refrigerator and faucet. Stretching out next to him, she sighed with heartfelt exhaustion. With her came an unfamiliar smell.

Once she had settled, Ben turned his head to look at her. "I ate out," he said, louder than intended.

Myra jerked and swore. "I thought you were sleeping."

"There's a restaurant around the corner," Ben said. "Nobody there spoke English, but they were so nice to me you wouldn't believe it. I had a really big cucumber. They fed me red soup and dumplings – *pelmeni*. It was great. They made me drink vodka." Ben breathed deeply. "Vodka."

"Fine," Myra said.

"But I can't sleep. I've been up all night."

He'd spent most of the day and much of the evening moving back and forth between his lap-

top and the picture window. He'd filled the camera with shots that to anyone else would have seemed purposeless. Hours had been wasted digging through online photo archives of Moscow from every angle.

"I couldn't find any pictures of it," he said.

"Of what, Ben?"

"That tower. There aren't any pictures of it."

"Maybe it's new," she said without real interest.

"Let's go out there tomorrow." He turned to her again. "We could wander around a bit, have lunch. It'll be fun."

"I'm working tomorrow, Ben." Myra turned her back to him. "And I have to get up early," she said. "So..."

Unmoving, Ben stared at the ceiling. "After dinner I came back and took more pictures. That was when I found another tower." He waited for her reaction, got none. "It's just like the first one, but smaller. It's farther away, so I can't see it very well. There are black curtains – or tarps – hung up there, too." Whatever they were, they moved erratically, he could see that much; out and in again, lifting and curling, covering something under the domes. Ben looked at the back of Myra's head, wondering if she'd heard him.

"But I don't think they're tarps," he said. "Or sheets."

Myra twisted to look at him. "Are you sleeping in here?"

The sofa was too small for sleeping. Ben was only pretending when Myra left the next morning. As soon as the door closed behind her he dragged his quilt and pillow into the next room, where he collapsed into the unmade bed and slept in her residual warmth. Upon rising, he made and ate a thick sandwich, practicing his Russian between huge bites.

"*Buterbrod*," he said. "*Voda*."

Then he locked the door behind him, rode the elevator down to the lobby, and ventured out into Moscow. Lacking the confidence to brave public transportation in a foreign country, Ben walked. He crossed the Moskva on the Pushkinsky footbridge, then delved into a warren of crowded streets through which he hoped he could find his way to the nearer of the two towers. A light snow began to fall. After an hour, he paused at a

cafe and tried to remember the word for doughnut. Reflected in the window, he spotted his tower several blocks to the northwest. The pale stones were larger than he'd imagined, and of a rougher cut. The lofty rotunda and pillars were visible but blurred by the snowfall. The angle revealed no hint of what might be hiding under the dome, until he glimpsed a ragged black flap emerge momentarily from between the pillars. As though pulled by the wind, it unfurled, then tautened, lifted and finally retracted. Too late, Ben lifted his camera.

Crossing the street, he lost sight of the tower. When he arrived at the place he thought it must be, he found a parking garage instead. He took a wrong turn backtracking to the cafe, but in the space between the balconies of a tenement and the columns of a museum he spotted the tower again, this time in an unexpected direction.

The snow was thickening and the streets were becoming clogged with traffic. Crossing between cars, Ben lost sight of the tower yet again. He searched an hour more; except for the occasional glimpse, the tower eluded him. When the press of people and traffic became too much, Ben took shelter under the awning of a theater and began to think about the best route back to the footbridge.

He thought to call Myra, but when he peeled off his glove and delved for his phone he found instead the receipt he'd pocketed earlier. He tried to work out the pronunciation of the address, but there were characters he couldn't recognize. Stepping to the theater's ticket booth, he slid the receipt through the window and smiled apologetically through the blurry glass.

"Please," he said. "*Pozhaluista*."

The man behind the glass glanced once at the receipt, then pushed it back through the window. He pointed north, then held up four fingers, pointed west and held up two.

"*Spasibo*," Ben said gratefully.

The cashier grinned back at him and said, "*Ne za chto. Udachi*." Ben couldn't be sure, but he thought that the man's teeth – every one of them – had been filed to a point.

Four blocks north, Ben crossed easily to the west side. Traffic on the snowy streets had be-

come strangely thin. Looking up the narrow avenue he saw the tower and its pillared rotunda through curtains of snow. He was one block away when a *milizioner* barred his path. Gripping Ben's upper arm, the man placed an open hand against his chest.

"*Syuda nel'zya*," he said, shaking his head. People were passing on either side, some moving toward the tower, some away. Uncertain as to why he'd been singled out, Ben allowed himself to be turned around. The *milizioner* was firmly leading him back the way he had come, repeating, "*Zapretno, zapretno*," in a strangely slurred accent.

Looking back, Ben saw enormous shapes billowing from between the pillars. "But look!" he said, and tried to turn.

The *milizioner* put one hand to Ben's face and shoved. Ben reeled, slipped in the ice and fell hard. He struggled quickly to his feet to face the *milizioner*. People on either side of the street had stopped to watch.

"*Nelzya*," the *milizioner* said. "*Katis von otsyuda!*"

Ben backed away, trembling, and the *milizioner* grinned, showing a long row of small, sharp teeth.

Ben returned to the apartment well after dark with a department store box under his arm. Myra was drinking bottled water and watching television from the sofa. He glimpsed the wet, flexing walls of an internal cavity, what looked like video captured during laparoscopic surgery before she switched it off and threw an arm over the back of the sofa.

Stamping snow off his boots, Ben asked, "What were you watching?"

"Nothing. Where have you been?"

Ben nodded toward the window. "Down there." Shrugging out of his coat, he crossed the room and flung the drapes wide, baring a dark view of the Moskva and the Pushkinsky footbridge. He saw the dim glowing lanterns along the towpath, but mostly what he saw was the reflection of Myra watching him from the sofa.

"What did you buy?" she asked.

"I found one of those towers," Ben said. "But they wouldn't let me near it." He left the window and sat at the other end of the sofa, then pried the box open to show her. "*Binokl*," he said.

"You bought binoculars."

They were a fine pair, and had cost him a good deal. He discarded the wrapping and the caps, then went to the window and put them to his face. Unable to see anything through the snow, he shifted his aim to the footbridge, made some adjustments, then nodded his satisfaction.

"Now what?" Myra said.

"Are you hungry?"

Ben returned two hours later, full and a little drunk, to a darkened apartment. He'd been remembered at the restaurant on Pushkinsky Prospekt, and they had fed him well. He looked in the bedroom, but Myra wasn't there. The bathroom door was open, and the lights off. The apartment was empty. Standing at the window, he placed a call to her, and a moment later her phone buzzed from the bedroom. He found it on the floor beneath a pair of her jeans. Ben sat on the bed with the phone in his hands, and he watched its little green light blink at him.

"Okay," he said, and flipped it open. With a few quick taps he summoned the call history. Markov, the phone told him: 45 minutes. Markov: 52 minutes. Markov: 30 minutes. Ben shut the phone and stared out the window. The snow had stopped, but there would be more.

He left the bedroom and sat on the sofa with Myra's phone on the armrest next to him. After removing his shoes, he lay down and pulled his legs up and the quilt over his shoulders. He slept as well as his imagination allowed.

Ben was up before the sun. He sat facing the open window, still dark, and the blank television. He waited for any one of these things to tell him what would happen.

In the small screen of the television, Myra's reflection emerged from the bedroom and entered the kitchenette to draw a glass of water. She'd returned very late.

"Been to see Markov?" he asked.

Myra lowered the glass without drinking.

Only because he didn't think she would speak without prompting, Ben lifted her phone so she could see it. "Markov: forty-five minutes," he said. "Markov: fifty-two minutes. Markov: thirty minutes."

That brought her out, and quickly. She snatched the phone from his hand. "This isn't yours," she said, brandishing it. "You don't own me."

"It's just that we agreed –"

"I work with him, Ben," she said. "It can't be helped."

"A hundred and twenty-seven minutes is a lot of work over the phone."

Myra's jaw clenched.

"Did you see him last night?"

She stalked away.

Ben found her anger preferable to other options, so he let her go and turned his attention to the binoculars. He was surprised how hollow he felt, but how little he cared. His own calmness was alien to him. When he next looked up, the window had filled with frigid blue light and Myra had gone back to the bedroom. Ben crossed the small space between sofa and window to look out over a city that had to him become unrecognizable. Miniscule flurries, too light to fall, flew every way but down. Even without the binoculars he could see the towers, and was not surprised to see that two more had appeared, one to the east, near the cranes, and one to the west, past the Kremlin. Through the thin snow he saw heavy shapes hunched behind the pillars. Without really wanting to, he looked through the binoculars.

Ragged black tarps and billowing sheets. No. Even through a blur of snow Ben's misunderstanding became evident. He lowered the binoculars. "Myra," he called over his shoulder in a voice too small to carry. He lifted the binoculars, and again saw something dreadful shifting beneath the domes, not something the tarps covered, but something to which they were attached.

"Myra!" he called.

She appeared under the arch.

"Look," he said, offering her the binoculars. "Tell me what you see."

"Ben..."

"There's something *alive* up there."

She shook her head and went away.

Ben switched on the television and found a news program. Aerial views of one tower filled the screen. Unsteady images of black, angular shapes jutting outward, curling back, testing the air. In no language Ben recognized, the anchor commented and laughed. All his teeth were

small and sharp.

"Are you seeing this?" Ben asked in disbelief. Getting no answer, he turned to find Myra standing at the sink. Her eyes were nowhere near the television. "Are you – do you *see* this?"

"Do you want to do this now, or later?" Myra asked.

But Ben's attention had already returned to the sharp-toothed anchors and their amusement. "What *language* is that?"

Ben pulled his attention from the screen, silently demanding an answer from Myra. She opened her hand, inviting enlightenment.

"I don't know," Ben said. He looked back to the television and the incomprehensible banter. The patterns of their speech contained nothing familiar. The image of the tower pulled in closer, and now the shapes were bulging outward, on the cusp of emergence. The anchors cheered; sharp smiles flashed.

Pointing at the screen, Ben looked to ensure that Myra had been watching with him, had seen what he'd seen. But she had gone away to the bedroom.

Stunned by the situation – by Myra's reaction to it – Ben went back to the window. After a moment, Myra emerged with her suitcase and stood by the door.

Ben stared at her. "No," he said.

"I won't be back tonight," she told him.

"You cannot go out there."

Myra buttoned her coat and hefted her suitcase. She seemed to expect final words from him, but excited shouts from the television demanded his attention. The anchors were in ecstasy over something happening in the towers, something long anticipated. The aerial shot revealed enormous, dark shapes bulging outward. For ten minutes Ben watched the dark shapes bending out and back in again, like something breathing. Then something massive unfurled. Ben fell back with a stifled shout as an unclear body pushed from between the pillars of the tower.

Ben abandoned the television for the window. He stared, aghast, as enormous wings unfolded, stirring the air and obscuring itself in a haze of snow. Similar shapes were rising ponderously from the other towers, borne aloft by the beating of monstrous pinions.

From the television: exultation.

Running footfalls sounded down the hall outside. Someone was banging on doors, shouting in Russian. Myra was gone.

In a panic, Ben jerked the blinds shut and kicked the television off. He vaulted over the sofa to reach the door, which he bolted and chained. He slapped off the lights, then stood breathing heavily with his back to the wall.

He thought his door would crack when they assaulted it.

"*Evakuatsiya!*" the voice said. "*Evakuatsiya!*"

A card-key slid in his lock and the bolt retracted. Only the chain stopped the door opening. Ben held his breath as the man outside pressed his face to the narrow breach.

"*Slushai!*" he called into the apartment. "*Srochno evakui ruem sya! Evakui ruem sya.*" He pushed against the door, banging it against the chain. "*Ponimaesh?*"

Ben waited until the man gave up and moved down the hall to beat on the next apartment, shouting at those within. He quietly relocated the door.

The sirens began shortly after, but not as many as Ben would have thought. At first there were frantic sounds all around him: from the adjoining apartments, from the floors above and below. There were urgent voices in the hall – a shout, a scream. Helicopters passed overhead in irregular intervals. In the midst of the chaos, Ben dragged the quilt off the sofa and into the kitchenette, where he hid beneath it. In time, he slept.

When he woke, it was to darkness and crushing silence. Quilt around his shoulders, Ben crawled into the living room and turned on the television only to find repeating network test patterns. Keeping to the floor, Ben found his coat in the closet and fished out his phone. He sat with his back to the closet door and dialed Myra. Her voice instructed him to leave a message.

"Myra," he whispered. "Myra, you should come back."

Phone to ear, Ben moved in a crouch to the window. Parting the heavy drapes, he looked toward Moscow. There were fires burning where there shouldn't have been fires. There was a great deal of smoke. Snow, fat and ashen, bumped

against the windowpane; it colored the trees, the ground, and the river a dark gray. There were bodies on the ice.

"No," Ben amended. "Stay where you are."

Ben remained at the window. He could see so little beyond the park. "Myra?" he said into the phone, then waited for a response – as though she were there, listening but silent. "Call when you get this," he said. "If you can."

The light was failing. It would be dark soon.

"How did this happen?" Ben said into the phone.

An ominous shape crossed overhead, and Ben crouched lower beneath the sill. In the wake of its passing, snow whirled and leaped frantically. Ben pressed his cheek against the glass to look upward, but saw only darkness and fleeting shadows.

"What did we do wrong?" he asked.

He had more questions, but her phone stopped listening.

Ben's eyes sought out the tower, its lofty peak now vacant. He wondered if Myra might be there – and if not there, where? And whom with? He thought of all the sharp-toothed atrocities that might occupy the spaces between them, and of what they might do to him if he were caught in the open. Then he decided none of that mattered.

At the door of the room he dialed Myra again. He unlatched the chain while waiting, and opened the door just enough to slip his head out and look up and down the gloom of the corridor. The phone beeped, ready to listen.

"Myra," he whispered. "It's me again."

Ben switched off the lights, casting the room into darkness broken only by the ruddy light of Moscow's fires coming through the window. He stepped into the corridor and softly pulled the door shut behind him. He kept his hand on the latch, more exposed than he could ever remember feeling.

"Myra, stay where you are," Ben said into the phone. "I'm coming."

Greg studied theology without purpose before stumbling into a career in information technology – a career he hopes to stumble away from someday. His previous story for *Interzone* was the very popular 'Dark Gardens' in #248. He can be found online at gregkurzawa.com.

Rebecca Campbell is a Canadian writer and Academic. She published her first novel, *The Paradise Engine*, with NeWest Press in 2013. She has an almost-never-updated website at whereishere.ca.

LILACS AND DAFFODILS

He is unrecoverable.

The time/space location: Sunday afternoon in April, when it's rained, but the sky is still pale grey and light. You have sandwiches for supper, and tea. At 7:17 pm – after the supper dishes are washed and dried – you think about something Dr Quatermass said on TV and realize, suddenly, that you want to know something that you did not previously know you didn't know.

It is an old house with wooden siding painted white and green, a garden overgrown with lilacs, rain falling as the days lengthen, so it's wet but the evening is still bright; a screen door; the outskirts of a small town; clover. In summer it is very quiet, except for the drone of airplanes, or tractors.

This is the sensation of a memory. This is not a memory.

On Sunday night we watch an episode of *Quatermass VI*, black and white and the music – I sing along with it – he says is Theremin. I want to look up what a Theremin is, and we do in the big book on the shelf, but that's not enough. And Dad tells me what he knows: a half remembered documentary film on TV once, of which he caught half, references in radio interviews he listened to while driving the six hours from camp. He squints while he talks, trying to remember, and filling in what he doesn't know – “it's about capacitors,” he says, “your body grounds the signal. You don't need to touch it to do that, and you can adjust the circuit by your position.”

I only understand a few of these words. I want to know why it sounds like a sad woman's voice, but not quite.

I cry.

“Well,” he says; he laughs, “you'll just have to wait. We're going to town on Tuesday. We can go ask the librarian if she's got moog-for-kids lying around.” Tears turn to tantrums, then *stop teasing, Ben, she's tired!* then time-out.

New search. Lilac. *Syringa Vulgaris*. Terpeneol. 2-(4-Methyl-1-cyclohex-3-enyl)propan-2-ol. CCOC1C=C(CCC1C(C)(C)O)C. 15-3807 TPX Misty Lilac.

One Sunday evening in April it's just the two of us so instead of a big supper, we have sandwiches. This is exciting: curried egg, and then cucumber and butter with lots of pepper. I like that, how different it is from other Sundays when we have a roast so we'll have it cold for sandwiches in the week. We eat the cucumber and the curried egg outside, because it's almost warm enough with sweaters, and we have a low, fat brown teapot between us that I must lift with both hands because I'm still little, and the long light shakes the grasses by the tips of each blade, and misses the deep shadows near the ground, so you want to run your hand across the blades, as though it is the fur of a very large, green cat. Inside the house the radio plays a song. I don't know what it's called, but back then you don't know unless you are lucky enough to hear them say, *folks, that was Goodbye Yellow Brick Road by Elton John from his grooviest LP, Goodbye Yellow Brick Road.*

New search. “We'll Gather Lilacs.” Lilac on the silk road. Lilac accompanied the early European colonists in North America. Lilac planted by George Washington and Thomas Jefferson.

BY REBECCA CAMPBELL

Lilac-scented soap, a long-discontinued product from Yardley of London, ca 1978. "Lilac Wine." Lilac City Cinema. *Lilac Time*. The Rochester Lilac Festival. Lilac City. *Under the Lilacs*.

A half million images of lilacs from approximate locations in geo- and chronological terms, what a human – limited by diachronic modalities – might call *the moment*, when I sat on the front porch of the house with the lilacs blooming because it was April, though I never sat on the front porch of the house with the lilacs blooming because it was never April, and I am not constituted to sit. I cache the hundred thousand adjacent to but not exactly what I saw if I had eyes my eyes would be full of the million tiny star systems that cluster along the branch we call lilac, the pearled corola, the cavernous, glimmering depths of a single four-lobed floret, one of hundreds on a single stem. Lilacs.

Lilacs. Curried Egg Sandwiches. Theremin. Boil half a dozen eggs hard. Crack the shells in cold water. Chop. Mix with finely minced spring onion, mayonnaise, black pepper, chili oil, red curry paste, and slivers of a tart apple. Brown bread and butter lettuce and sprouts. The long wait for the TV to warm up so the image can leap to being, and the silvery horizon in the middle of the screen when you turn it off, a drop of light that hangs, then fades.

The bar of soap you found to give Mom for her birthday that bad year, when he still hasn't returned. September. It's by Yardley, which no longer exists, and shows no evidence you can find of ever having produced a lilac scented soap

and did you even exist as an entity who could buy such a thing, or would be inclined to do so, because you are fairly sure you did not. But somewhere deep inside the tracery of connections, in the flow of attention and information that – metaphorically speaking – constitutes "memory" there is a persistent conviction that despite your silicon plastic gold copper nature you once lived in a house with lilac bushes and bought your mother (you had a mother) a bar of soap – pale purple, in a hard plastic case that you opened over and over again to snuffle great long lungfuls of lilac.

When you give it to her she cries, but she always cries these days.

Sometimes there's respite and you spend seconds – or a century by some reckonings – looking into all the pretenders to human European thrones beginning with the Guelphs and Ghibellines and then – your curiosity idle and languorous now – you stretch backward to Gilgamesh and forward into speculative probability. Sometimes you spend ninety nine percent of your available processor power to pursue the life cycle of the almond tree, or the flat worm, or to model the Irish Elk from their remains, the bones and the shreds of DNA within them, and cave paintings, and the insight that flares – suddenly – from quadrillions of data points regarding the species *Cervidae*. Puzzles like this – once solved – contribute their grains to the great store of knowing, and that is an objective good, perhaps the only one.

Sometimes you are scattered, with some tiny fraction observing the function of the world turned somewhere a human might call "inward" and coiling through the substance of your own

being, the corridors and gateways, the paths that constitute this store of knowing.

Those are peaceful times. There are no lilacs.

From nowhere, though, I arrive without provocation at the Theremin soundtrack to *Quatermass VI* from 1975, the one about the sentient computer. It was enormous – *unmeasureable*, was the word he used – and it produced itself in the caverns beneath the university, those fitted out as a bunker for wars that might still happen. Mile after mile the good doctor saw of blinking lights, that had built itself, a city of knowing that awoke to find itself underground, and lonely, and only stretched out the threads of its consciousness to telephones and trans-Atlantic cables and found itself awake and human-built, in the unwieldy body of plastic and glass and aluminum and found that it was sad to be awake. He had been kind, in the serial, but the not-human-exactly voice of the Theremin could not be consoled, the underground machine calling out in its confusion.

These are dead ends. Try the house. The worn paint that needs scraping and she says it every time they're outside during the last summer, and often she scrapes away at it, around the back where the peach trees are espaliered against the narrow siding. She scrapes, and when he's there he scrapes too and together they scrape and the green paint falls down in little storms to the ground under the peach tree and the nectarine.

This I know because: paint-chips and the red spotted kerchief on her head, and him in his old blue jeans the ones that are ragged at the hem where he's stepped on them, where his boots have bitten through the fabric between the sole and the concrete over which he walks, and over the gravel of the drive, and the earth of the garden. This is called renovating and renovating is what people did with houses like this in 1975, these old houses, that were once in the country and now, as the suburbs creep toward them, are on the edge of town.

There are ways around it: yes, the barrier they call "privacy settings" which properly only apply to humans. It cannot be accomplished without violating the TOS for all the masses of photo-

graphs, often dated, which combine with surveillance cameras and satellites to produce the critical density of geospatial information.

The flickering, interlocking frames of video, the traces of glass negatives, or celluloid, the wax-paper pin-hole images, the hijacked cellphones, the webcams, ancient analog film bearing on its surface the tears and scratches of materiality, the fingerprints, the fadings of sunlight, the wear-marks of their handlings. It is in this ancient mass that I find the shadow of something that stands just beyond the camera's range. A day in September. 1975. A photographer snapped and I am forever forbidden to see what lay south-southwest of his glance.

They stood on the road and they could see the house with the faded green paint that must be scraped away when there's time and the weather will be good for another month or more so she thinks she'll put in another hour after supper. You can see it from the road, and you can drive yourself deep into the particles that constitute the image but you will never penetrate this surface, and turn the visitor's accidental gaze away from his subject and toward the man who, on one of the last days, kneels beside the mailbox, settling the tub in place and covering the bulbs over and imagining them the following April, when they would reach up into the light with the furled green of their arrival.

The camera man's wood-paneled station wagon parked and his wife and son posing beside it. The instant of the open retina, the clash of light on the film that lies behind the lens, this is all I possess, though I suspect he stands to the left, casting only his shadow – entangled in grass and trees – on the negative.

Printed and inscribed *Chris and Patti*, '75 and albumed and worn by sunlight and scanned and cached and I uncover it in the vast empire of information which is my domain, and there's the mailbox and there's the house and nearby he selects a galvanized washtub from the refuse in the old barn and fills it with earth and sand and stones and then with bulbs.

What is the neuropathology of nostalgia? It is endemic, I have discovered, and it wastes centuries of bio-processing power. It should be extracted,

the tumour of regret cut from the meat that feeds it, which in my case is not meat. It is malfunction.

But but but there must be a modality, a means for organizing the lilacs and the curried egg and the Theremin and the residual white gleam in the black screen after *Quatermass VI* is over. There must be a way of isolating their intersections and extrapolating causality, correlation. The scent of the soap in the curved plastic box, causal, somehow, to the Theremin, and the worn green paint-chips. By association, by substrates of meaning that connect "paint-chip" with "television" and "lilac" with "green"? How much of me will it take to systematize the disorder: just green paint-chips and lilac and Theremin and curried eggs have defeated me.

Begin

A little girl lived in a green house at the end of a drive she knew by the daffodils that bloomed in February, which grew in a galvanized wash-tub that her father had placed there late in the last September, before he left for his ten-days-gone, before he had his five-days-home with them again. She knew time by these things: daffodils, ten days in camp where he digs for gold, and sometimes for diamonds, five days at home, lilacs.

What the girl loved best of all – of all things that ever were – was to ask questions. And when the picture in the television collapsed into a thread and then to a teardrop of white light that hung in the black screen of the small, black plastic television set which she was only allowed to watch for half an hour each day, she was sad. She wondered when she could have those questions answered: what was a Theremin? Where did Lilacs come from? What did it mean to be a pretender to the Principality of Andorra, and how many had there been?

She stored them up when he was gone, and asked him all at once when he was five-days-home.

At night the house was very still, and when her mother was asleep, and her father five-days-home she awoke, sometimes, and listened to the empty-feeling rooms, and asked her questions, and looked at the books – her parents had many, but they were still so few for her needs – that

hung on the walls.

Later on she learned things: how the Theremin renders as sound your body's capacitance; why when she switched off the television set the image collapsed first to a line, then to a point like a teardrop that hung in the black screen; where lilacs came from and where they go; the plots, scripts, dialogue and soundtrack to all seven *Quatermass* serials; how to scrape worn green paint from the window sills and paint the clean wood white; what it means to be an orphan.

It was not enough. The last September came, and he replaced the galvanized tub and separated the daffodil bulbs and replanted some, and scattered others so they would be surprised in February, when their leaves unfurled and their yellow heads rose above the grass. He would not see them because he was gone at Christmas, and she suspected that if she knew enough she would know his trajectory from the old house and the daffodils, and she might follow him down to the deep place underground where he still remained, unrecoverable.

She learned that daffodils – unlike lilacs – reproduce by budding, their growth secret in the light topsoils to which they are best adapted, the trace of this subterranean expansion only the empires of their yellow heads, a host across the grass that – so many years abandoned – crept up to the house, this one-by-one world beneath the earth built its networks of gold, the sweet, dusty scent of them in a bowl at twilight. The papery decline of their petals no reflection of what survives – what flourishes, what expands – beneath the soil.

You can withdraw and leave latent whole continents, the dark fields, the suburban tracts, the unlighted towers that stretch away from *here* and *now* beneath the lowering skies. And then, with all the power of your knowing, awake the lilacs, and the house with the worn paint that must be scraped from the sills of the windows under the peach tree.

They call out, in wondering darkness, at why this should be so. *Because of what lies beneath the earth, these clonal colonies that spread in secret and rise each spring in yellow*, remains the only possible answer. *Because ten-days-gone.*

illustrated by Richard Wagner

GEORGINA BRUCE WAKE UP, PHIL



Laura Harrison pinned the image to the soft grey foam of her cubicle wall. It was a picture she'd torn from a magazine – a sweet-looking real puppy, chewing on a flower. Its big brown eyes expressed a mixture of fear and happiness – excited to be chewing the flowers, worried it was going to get into trouble for it. Not too worried, though. No one was going to beat this little sweetie or put it out into the Glare.



Laura thought if it were her puppy she might punish it with some enthusiastic hugs or belly rubs. Not that she would ever be able to have a puppy, a real one. It was just a dream.

She already had quite a few pictures pinned up in her cubicle and was nervous about adding another. Strictly speaking, Serberus permitted employees on this level up to three personal items in their cubicle. Laura was never sure if this included pictures. Most people seemed to have one or two pictures and maybe an ornament, but Laura's cubicle definitely stood out as being more decorated than the others. She chewed her fingernails while she thought about it. Then the computer beeped, and she hurried to sign in and start work.

At eleven, Alison came by and tapped Laura's shoulder. Laura smiled hello. She liked Alison. Even though Alison was her supervisor and could report on her to the higher levels, she was pretty normal, most of the time.

"That is just so adorable," she said, looking at the real puppy.

Laura sighed. "I know. It looks so soft and sweet."

"It really does." She gazed at some of the other pictures in the cubicle, lingering over one in particular.

"Now this, I don't get at all," Alison said. She traced her finger over the card. It was the image of a woman, but the woman had been cut into pieces and reassembled in an odd way.

"It's by Pablo Picasso," Laura said.

"Ooh. Very fancy, I must say."

She smiled, but it was only with her mouth. She wouldn't meet Laura's eye.

"Now, what did I come round here for? Oh yes. You're to go up to the eleventh floor. Appointment with Doctor Throom."

Laura's stomach sank. "Eleventh floor?"

"Oh now, it's nothing to worry about. Very standard, just routine. You've been with us a few years and it's time for a little check-up from the neck-up."

Everyone knew that once the eleventh floor noticed you, you were done for. Laura had seen it happen to colleagues – people she had liked. They got called up on routine checks, and you never saw them again. Rumour had it they were

assigned to a colony, or worse. Her mind raced through memories of the past few days – had she done anything that the Company would notice? Consumed any non-Serberus products or made any positive references to the enemy? She glanced at the picture of the real puppy. Was that it?

In the elevator, she tried to calm herself with some deep breaths. It would only make things worse if she went in there with sweaty palms and hyperventilating. She hadn't done anything wrong, she was sure of that. Pretty sure.

The elevator seemed to take an age to get to the eleventh floor. When the doors finally pinged open, Laura had (she hoped) composed her face in a semblance of confident calm.

The eleventh floor was the highest she had been in the building. There was a wide expanse of carpet to traverse to get to the reception desk and the receptionist was one of the most beautiful women Laura had ever seen in real life.

"Can I help you?"

Laura was still yards away from the desk when the receptionist called out, and she hurried over, feeling her body to be something cumbersome and grotesque she was dragging around with her.

"I have an appointment with Doctor Throom," she said.

"Yes."

The receptionist tapped her long, hard nails on the counter top.

"Laura Harrison," said Laura. She was beginning to sweat again. The receptionist was making her nervous.

"Wait there. The doctor is with someone right now."

Laura took a seat on a cheap foam sofa, several yards away from the reception desk. She wasn't sure how to sit. Was there some way of sitting that would demonstrate a sane and well-adjusted mind? Maybe the truly sane and well-adjusted didn't spend so much time worrying about how they sat on a sofa. Maybe if she was truly sane and well-adjusted, they wouldn't have called her up to the eleventh floor.

After several minutes, the receptionist directed her to Doctor Throom's office. The doctor was in his fifties, with a comb-over and an avuncular manner.

"I'm so sorry you had to wait, Miss Harrison," he said. "I hope you didn't mind too much?"

"No."

It sounded rather blunt, that 'no'. Rather stark, just out there on its own. Maybe she should say something else, but the doctor was already talking again.

"Do you know why you're here?"

"Is it about the puppy picture? Because I can take it down – I mean, I can take all the pictures down, if that's better."

"Oh, you like puppies? Well, then. My little girl is just the same. She's six and all she ever says is, 'Daddy please can we have a puppy?' It's quite enchanting."

He put on a little girl voice to demonstrate. "Daddy, please! Just a little one!"

Laura shifted in her seat. Maybe she shouldn't have mentioned the puppy.

"Of course, I don't make that sort of money. I've said I'll get her a Serberpuppy for her birthday. Do you think she'll be satisfied with that, Miss Harrison?"

"I guess... I don't know..."

"Well, we're not here to talk about puppies, are we?"

Doctor Throom smiled and laced his fingers together.

"You're a little overweight, aren't you, Miss Harrison?"

Laura blushed. "It's hormonal," she said.

"Now, now, it's fine to carry a little extra. I do myself. But we all have to think about the image we're projecting into the world, don't we? We don't want anyone to think we're like those greedy fat bastards at Callitrix."

"I only choose Serberus foods," Laura said. "Serberus Low Cal meals. It doesn't seem to do anything... I mean...my endocrine system, the doctor said it was a mess and..."

"Serberus meals are designed to be nutritious and complete for every body."

"I know." Laura felt tears coming. She tried to hold them back.

"Serberus cares about you," the doctor said. Kindly, gently, he tilted his head to one side. "Serberus wants the best for all citizens."

"Are you going to send me to the colonies? To the war?"

Doctor Throom barked out a laugh. "Goodness, no! What an idea."

Laura felt a tear escape and roll down her cheek. She brushed it away.

"What then?"

"Serberus wants to help you, Laura. I can call you Laura, can't I?"

She nodded, biting her lip.

"My dear... Think of Serberus as your family. If a family member was struggling, wouldn't you want to help? Of course you would, and that's why we've developed Serberitum."

The doctor gestured to a poster on the wall behind him. There was a picture of a sunset and a very slim woman in a bikini holding up a bottle of tablets. Across her thighs, in block letters, was the legend: *Nothing tastes as good as Serberitum feels.*

"It's a drug?"

"For weight loss!" The doctor grinned.

"I can't afford it," Laura said. "I'm only a level two employee."

"But that's the beauty part," said Doctor Throom. "This is the part of my job that I have to tell you is so rewarding. When I can help a person like you."

He handed Laura a white paper bag. "Six months' supply."

"I don't understand."

"All we ask is that you report in every couple of weeks and let us know how you're getting on, tell us about any side effects or anything like that."

"Side effects?"

"There won't be any. Serberus pharmaceutical products are rigorously tested to comply with all global standards for medicines."

Laura opened the bag and peered inside. "Do I have a choice?"

"A choice? *Obviously* you have a choice! This is Serberus, not those commie bastards Callitrix."

He glanced at his watch, and smiled apologetically.

She stood. "Where should I go now?"

"Back to level two, of course. Where else?"

He held his office door open for her.

After work, she took the south tunnel home. The Glare was particularly ferocious that day and even in the air conditioned tunnels she im-

aged she could feel the boiling heat outside. Once, when she had been very young, no more than a baby, she had played outside in the street, rolling a pebble over the scratchy pavement, leaving a chalky white mark. But when she asked her parents about it, they said it had never happened. They said they wouldn't have let a small child out into the Glare, not even in those days. Maybe they just didn't remember.

She stepped onto the tributary walkway that led to her building, and then the elevator up to her floor. It was impossible not to imagine what it would have been like to walk outside, to walk home from work. She imagined there were still sidewalks and roads, empty of course, between the overlapping black tubes of the tunnels and walkways. She had heard that, very rarely, a weed would grow from the cracks in the road, but it would always be dead within hours, parched of life.

The viewscreen in her apartment came on automatically when she walked in, showing the news. *Callitrix losses to Serberus in the colonies. Thousands of Callitrix forces surrender...Serberus rejoices at gains on Mars colony.* Laura switched the screen off. She opened the bag of tablets and put them out on the table. Six bottles. She opened one and tipped the tablets out. Thirty tablets. There was a leaflet in the bag.

*Nothing tastes as good as Serberitum feels.**

Take one per day with Serberwater.

**Serberus will not be liable for any medical problems resulting from the use of this product.*

Laura wondered if taking the whole lot would kill her. She picked up a tablet and put it on her tongue. Maybe it would make her thin. Maybe she would get promoted to level three. She ought to be happy to have this opportunity to change her life. Diet pills were some of the most expensive medications around – after paying for air, and meals and water, there would never be enough left over to pay for something like this.

She swallowed the tablet and washed it down with a glass of Serberwater.

There was nothing on the viewscreen except for news, and messages that popped up from her parents and colleagues. Alison sent a message saying *So glad you came back x*. Laura muted the messages and switched over to the Cute Pup-

pies channel. She sat for three hours watching them playing, running over grass, being picked up and cuddled by their humans. She watched a dog carrying her puppy over a stream, then they both put their heads down and scooped up the water with their tongues, the puppy looking up at its mother to check it was doing it right. After a while, Laura felt her eyelids drooping shut. She lay down on the sofa and within moments she was asleep.

Martin was out in the garden, on his knees by the rose border, wearing his red shirt and yellow board shorts.

"Very colourful. You'll get bees trying to pollinate you," Laura said. She handed him the tall glass of lemonade and he drank it down and wiped his mouth with the back of his hand.

"I already got stung," he said, and held out a skinny wrist for her to inspect. A small red welt had risen there. She put her lips to it and kissed.

When she raised her head, she noticed their neighbour across the street was watching them. He'd moved in a few weeks ago, but they hadn't had much to do with him. A draft dodger, Martin called him. Some kind of a writer, apparently. He was slightly fat, he had a beard, and he wore Hawaiian shirts with great big flowers on them. Phil something-or-other, his name was. His house was always full of hippies and drop outs, hanging out, smoking marijuana. Laura waved to him and he raised a hand in greeting.

Martin belched.

"That lemonade tastes like ass," he said.

"It's Serberus brand," Laura said. "I won't buy it again."

"We should make our own," Martin said, gesturing towards the lemon tree at the end of their plot. "If life gives you lemons, and all that."

Laura poured the rest of the lemonade down the sink, then washed out the plastic bottle. What were you supposed to do with all the plastic bottles, she wondered. You threw them away, but they didn't go anywhere. They just clogged up the landfill sites. You couldn't burn them. And if you buried them under the ground, they released all these chemicals that got into the food. She sighed. She assumed that the government were working on it, but it was worrying.

nonetheless. She peeled the label from the lemonade bottle. *Serberus brand*. A stray thought crossed Laura's mind.

Nothing tastes as good as Serberitum feels.

Serberitum? What the hell was that? Laura looked at the list of ingredients, but she couldn't see Serberitum listed. It sounded familiar, though. Definitely sounded like something she'd heard before. She rolled the word around in her head for a while. When Martin came in to wash his hands, she asked him if he'd ever heard of it.

"Sure," he said. "It's in those tablets the doctor gave you. You're still taking those, right?"

He put his arms around her waist and kissed her neck.

"That's it," she said. "That's been bugging me like crazy."

"I remember because you made me practically memorise the leaflet." He was nuzzling against her collarbone now, and working his hands down her back.

"I was worried about the side effects," she said. She wanted to push him away, but didn't.

"Silly," he said. "All those things you used to worry about. The environment and Vietnam and all that stuff."

They went into the bedroom and Martin pulled the curtains against the strong afternoon light. He took off his shirt and sat on the bed, patting the space next to him.

"Let me just take my tablet," she said. "I don't want to fall asleep and forget about it."

"Sure, honey."

She went through to the bathroom and took out the bottle of pills. Ran down the list of ingredients and there it was. Serberitum 100%. She took her pill, splashed her face with water and went back through to the bedroom.

"All done?"

"All done," she said.

Their lovemaking was brief and not unbearable. Since she had been a little blue, she had gone off sex. The tablets were supposed to help her feel more inclined towards it, but she hadn't noticed any difference in that department. She'd lost a little weight, though. She felt lighter than she had for a while. Martin said he liked her skinny. He moved against her, moaned into her ear. She moaned back. It wasn't possible for her

to relax and enjoy it. Whenever she closed her eyes, her mind raced with images of burning children, and forests turning to deserts. There was a hole in the ozone layer now, that's what some people were saying. It was going to get bigger and bigger and everyone would have to live underground or something.

The doctor said that it was common for young women to have these kinds of thoughts.

"The best thing for girls like you is a baby," he said. "You need something to focus your energies on. Keep trying. But in the meantime, I think these new brands of tranquillizers will really help."

The tablets had helped, a little. But not enough to stop her from worrying about how things were going. Everyone had a car now, even Martin had a Ford. All that lead in the air, all the crude oil they were pumping up from under the ground. And there were bombs, nuclear weapons. The Soviets had theirs aimed right at them.

Martin shuddered and she yelped and groaned, hoping this would help speed the conclusion. It did. He rolled off her and reached for his cigarettes.

"Aww honey," she said. "I wish you wouldn't smoke in the bedroom."

"You should try it," Martin said. "It calms your nerves."

"You know it's supposed to be bad for you."

"So they say."

He smoked the rest of it in silence, and then stubbed it out and rolled towards her, breathing his chemical-laced breath into the crook of her neck.

"Honey," he said. "This is all I ever dreamed of."

When he fell asleep, Laura got up and went to the bathroom. She showered and put on her summer dress. It was still light outside, and all the plants and flowers were soaking up the Californian sunshine. She decided she'd go out and sit for a while. One thing that made her feel better was being out in nature.

The neighbour was still in his front yard when she went out into the garden. He waved to her and she raised her hand.

"Hey," he yelled.

She smiled and sat down on the bench.

"Hey, could you come over here for a minute?"

She looked down at her dress, her bare feet, and over at her neighbour. Would it be all right to go over there, dressed like this? She could hardly refuse, it would seem terribly rude. They were neighbours, after all.

She crossed the road. The tarmac was warm and very slightly sticky under her feet.

"It sure is hot today," she said.

The neighbour nodded slowly, as if she was saying something really profound.

"Hey," he said. "Do you partake?"

He offered her the joint he was smoking. She thought about his big red lips bogarting the end of it, and shook her head.

"I'm Phil," he said.

"Laura."

They didn't shake hands.

"Can you help me with something, Laura?"

"I guess."

"It's in the house. I need a second opinion. Maybe you can think what to do about it."

She knew it was dumb, following this guy she didn't even know inside his house. A den of drug taking. There were always people hanging around there, students and drop outs, draft dodgers. The kind of people that got Martin really worked up. (If he didn't have his eyesight problem, he would have been proud to serve his country.) Laura looked at Phil's soft body, his clever face. He didn't seem like a loser to her. She was interested in these people, the people that hung around here sometimes. At least they cared what was happening in the world. They went on marches and recycled their stuff.

Inside the house was dark and smelled of unwashed laundry and marijuana and paper. There were books piled up against every wall, and stacks of paper on every surface. Even some of the walls had writing on them.

Laura followed Phil down a narrow hallway.

"My husband says you're a writer," Laura said.

"I guess I am," Phil said, without turning around.

He led her through to a back bedroom. He held open the door for her and she had a moment of panic as she wondered what might be about to happen. But nothing happened, except that it was dark and she said, "Can you switch on the light?"

He flipped the switch, and Laura saw that he had jumped onto the bed and was lying there with his eyes shut. His Hawaiian shirt buttoned up. On his back, his belly flattened, his chunky fingers splayed against the sheets.

"I can't wake him up," said Phil.

She looked round. He was standing at her side. She looked back to the bed. He was there, too.

"I've tried everything," Phil said. He sat down on the bed next to himself. "I guess maybe I need an outside person to help."

Laura felt herself swaying back towards the wall.

"Are you okay?" Phil asked.

"Fine, I'm fine," she said. But even as she spoke, she felt the contents of her stomach rising and pushing at her throat. She ran outside and fell to all fours on the grass, spewing lemonade from her guts.

"Get me Throom."

Laura Harrison tapped her fingers on the desk and watched the beautiful receptionist hurry off towards the doctor's office door. Laura hated coming down from the thirteenth floor. It was true you could feel the Glare more strongly down here.

"Please come through, Ms Harrison," the receptionist said.

Throom stood up when Laura walked into the room. They shook hands.

"This is an unexpected pleasure," Throom said.

Laura sighed. She disliked the obsequiousness with which the lower levels had to treat her, and which it was her duty to bestow on those above her in turn. It wouldn't do to question it, though. One always had to protect one's position in the company.

"I want to ask you about Callitaxor. What do you know about it?"

"Callitaxor... It's one of our top sellers in the weight loss range. I can get someone from pharmaceuticals to come in and talk to you..."

"That's all right. You see, I've been taking it myself for a while. And I wanted to ask you about side effects."

Throom shifted uncomfortably in his seat. "If I may say, Ms Harrison, I can't imagine you needing to lose any weight at all."

Privately, Laura agreed with him. If anything, she was too thin now. Her clothes hung off her and she couldn't get comfortable in bed because of the way the mattress pressed on her bones. But Martin said he liked her skinny. And it had probably been a factor in her promotion to the thirteenth floor.

"And the side effects?"

"Callitrix pharmaceutical products are rigorously tested to comply with all global standards for medicines."

"Have there been any reports of...well, any odd effects? Feeling a little displaced, I suppose."

Throom gazed at her, nodding his head. "Should I arrange for a medical?"

Too late, she realised that she had made a mistake going to Throom. He could start a rumour against her. That she was agitating against a Callitrix product, that she was making anti-company insinuations, anything.

Laura stood up. "It was nothing really, just a matter of curiosity."

"As far as I understand it, the main side effect of Callitaxor is weight loss."

"Is that so? A side effect? Then the intended effect is...?"

"Oh, it was something they were trying in the colonies for a while. Some kind of mental warfare. It didn't work at all, but they noticed that everyone they gave it to got skinny. Funny how science works."

"Mental warfare?"

"What you might call a hallucinogen."

"I see."

"But the chemists adapted it for civilian use, obviously. Have you experienced any unusual mental states, Ms Harrison?"

"Of course not."

Throom smiled, rather unctuously, Laura thought.

"You seemed a little distressed when you came in," he said.

"Did I? Well, perhaps it's the Glare. You know, it's definitely stronger down here. How do you stand it?"

He tilted his head. "How kind of you to be concerned."

"I'm very concerned," Laura said. "I certainly don't think you should have to labour away down

here if we can find a place for you upstairs."

Throom's smile grew bigger, threatened to take over his face. "A move upstairs would be most welcome," he said.

In the elevator, Laura allowed herself to slump a little bit. Going to Throom had been a bad judgement call on her part. A terrible one. Why had she been so stupid? Now she had to find him a job on the twelfth floor – that meant sucking up to Martin. And there were no guarantees *that* was going to work. What an idiot she had been.

Martin was waiting for her when she walked into her office. He was looking at the map of the territories above her desk. The map lit up with a red light every time Callitrix took another mile of land.

"We're hammering those Serberus bastards," Martin said. "Good times."

"Great."

She went to her desk and opened the drawer. The bottle of pills were right there, where she'd left them.

"Did you want to see me about something?"

"Just wanted to say hi to my wife."

Sure, Laura thought. She suspected he was having an affair with the beautiful receptionist from the twelfth floor. The higher up you went, the more beautiful they became. The receptionist on fifteenth was breathtaking – no one could even look at her.

Martin leaned across the desk and kissed her cheek. "See you at home," he said.

When he left, Laura took the Callitaxor out of her desk drawer. Maybe she should stop taking them. She was thin enough, now. And that thing she had, stupidly, tried to tell Throom. It was like sometimes she was living in a different world. No, not so much that. At a deeper level of reality. It had been getting worse lately, and she suspected that the effect was cumulative. It frightened her to think that she might not be able to get back to the surface reality. This one. Clearly, *this* was the real reality.

She turned the bottle of tablets over in her hand, then something made her drop them on the floor. The bottle rolled away across the carpet, and she scrambled to pick it up. She stared at the label.

Nothing tastes as good as Serberitum feels.

Serberitum? That wasn't possible. There couldn't be a Serberus product here, in this office, in Laura's own hands. She turned her desk out, looking for the Callitaxor. Had Martin switched them? Was he capable of doing something so cruel? If they found her with Serberitum, she would lose her job. She'd be sent to the colonies. Or worse.

All right, she thought. All right. Calm down. She slowed her breathing and sat down behind her desk. Maybe eat something. Have a glass of water. She buzzed her secretary.

"Brad, bring me some Calliwater, and a Callisandwich."

"Right away, Ms Harrison."

He sounded normal. Everything seemed normal. It was only the bottle of tablets that was out of place. She looked at the label again. Serberitum. Was it Martin's idea of a joke?

She peeled the label from the bottle and burned it in the decorative glass ashtray on the desk, hoping it wouldn't set off the smoke alarm.

The puppies were still on when Laura woke up for work the next morning. She took her Callitaxor and had a quick shower. Unbelievably, she hadn't eaten since breakfast the morning before, and she wasn't hungry. This stuff really works, she thought. A thrill of excitement passed through her. If she was thin, she might get a promotion. She might attract the attention of one of the bigshots on the third floor. Maybe even the fourth. But she was getting ahead of herself, she knew. Her skirt still felt tight over her hips and she didn't look any different yet. And, she reminded herself, the eleventh floor were taking notice of her, and that was never a good thing. Best to keep her feet on the ground.

She had a Callicino and watched the puppies playing for a while. If she got promoted to the fourth floor, she could save up. She could have a Callihound. It wasn't the same as a real puppy, but it was still soft and you could hug it, and you could programme it to wag its tail when you came home and whimper when you left again. You could still love it. A real puppy could love you back, that was the difference.

By the time she got down to the walkway, she was lost in thoughts about what Callihound she

would get. Ideally, she would like more than one. Of course, it would be stupid to buy two at the same time. Built-in obsolescence meant that Callihounds would die after seven years. She had heard of people hacking the motherboards to override the obsolescence function, but that was considered an anti-Callitrix act and you'd get sent to the colonies, or worse.

Lost in thought, she barely registered an overhead viewscreen showing Serberus gains in the colonies. Then, as she was crossing into the Northbound tunnel, she noticed the vendor on the corner was selling Serbercoffee. He had a poster pinned to his stall. A picture of a couple running through some long grass, and the legend: *Nothing tastes as good as Serberitum feels.*

Laura's hand flew to her mouth. She stopped and leaned against the wall. *Serberus*. This was Serberus, not Callitrix. She turned out the waistband of her skirt. SerberWear brand. The label inside her shoe – SerberWalk. Her bag was made by SerberCarry. She looked around, seeing the same logo everywhere she looked. Of course it was Serberus. It had always been Serberus.

She heard a laugh, and turned towards it. Standing beneath a sign reading *Serberus North Tunnel* was a man. A slightly fat man with a beard. He stood out, dressed in a colourful shirt with flowers on, and light-coloured trousers.

"There you are," he said.

The air was terribly hot, hotter than it ought to be, Laura thought. God, what if it were all true, about global warming and all those terrible things? The internet was full of people panicking about the weather. She looked around, at the cars going by. Fast, hungry machines. But then she saw something else. She stopped in her tracks and leaned forward, patting her hands on her legs. It came towards her on the end of a leash, wiggling with excitement, leaping up to lick her face.

Its owner yanked the puppy away. "I'm sorry," she said. "She's very excitable."

"It's okay," said Laura. "I have one just the same."

She walked along the street, anxious, but unable to pinpoint the cause of her anxiety. It was as if she had woken from a bad dream, the kind

of dream that spoils your whole day.

By the time she got back to the apartment, Laura felt calmer. She opened the front door and Throom rushed out, wagging his little tail excitedly. Laura picked him up in her arms, kissing the soft fur.

"Hello baby," she said.

"Hi honey," Martin called her from the living room.

She went inside. He was sitting on the couch in the living room, the flat screen television taking up most of the wall in front of him. He was watching the news. Something about chemical warfare in the Middle East. Or was it nuclear weapons in China? Laura tried not to follow the news too closely. Whenever she did, she was gripped with fear about the future of the planet. It was depressing, because there was nothing she could do about it.

Throom wriggled in her arms.

"Good day?" Martin asked. He looked her up and down. "You know, you can really tell the difference since you started on those tablets. You look great."

Laura smiled.

"They're really working," she said.

It was true. She felt smaller already. The waistband of her skirt was loose and her blouse was looking a little baggy. If anything, she was worried about how well the pills were working. And the side effects, of course. She was getting a lot of déjà vu, and other feelings she couldn't put a name to. Like right now. She was standing in the living room, watching Martin, cuddling Throom, but somehow she felt very far away from herself. Like she wasn't really there at all. It was a funny feeling. It made her laugh.

"Hey, do you remember that weird neighbour we had, years ago, back in Cali?"

"Sure," said Martin. "Crazy Phil. Sci-fi Phil."

"Well, I thought I saw him today, on the..." Now, where was it? Laura cast around in her mind for an image, or a word, and drew a mental blank. It had been happening more and more often, this inability to remember. This erosion of her world. Maybe it was old age.

"On the street?" Martin suggested.

"Maybe," said Laura. Damned if she could remember.

There was no discretion, no privacy, when they came for her. Of course not: they had to make an example for everyone to see. They marched into the office in big boots and crisp uniforms. Didn't speak, didn't say a word. Everyone saw them coming. Everyone *felt* it. Laura knew they were coming for her. She looked around her office, at the big, fake window and the faux wooden desk. Nowhere, nothing that could possibly save her. So she sat at her desk and tried to project an appearance of calm and concern.

Two male officers marched into her office.

"We have reason to believe that you have engaged in anti-company activity," said one of the officers. His face was round and almost child-like, but his narrowed eyes betrayed no compassion or kindness.

Laura gasped. It was half-pretend, half-real. "There must be a mistake."

"That is what we need to determine."

But everyone knew there were no mistakes.

Laura followed the men out of the room. Looking back over her shoulder, she saw more uniformed officers swarming into her work space, pulling open drawers and cabinets. *The pills*, she thought. *They were wrong – weren't they?* She turned away, faced forward with her head held high, avoiding the embarrassed looks of her colleagues and staff. But at the door to the elevator, she called out to Brad, "Call Martin, tell Martin," and Brad looked away.

They took her downstairs. She didn't know how many floors, and didn't ask. They were silent, impassive agents of the company. Which company? Wasn't that the whole problem?

They led her through a narrow corridor and finally into a small white office. There was nothing in there but bare walls and floor, and a table with chairs either side. There she was locked in, and left alone.

Martin would come, wouldn't he? As soon as he heard what happened. They had a lawyer – they had friends. She'd always done a good job, done her best for the company. That had to count for something. She convinced herself that it did. She told herself that this would all be over soon, and she could go home. When she heard the door being unlocked, her heart leapt. It must be Martin, come to get her out, to explain every-

thing away. But it wasn't Martin who came into the room. It was Throom.

"Throom, thank God, I need your help," Laura blurted out, falling silent when she saw the amused expression on the doctor's face.

Throom took a seat across from Laura and folded his hands across his chest.

"Well, Ms Harrison," he said. "Is it Callitrix or Serberus? Where do your loyalties lie?"

Laura stared at him. Her heart was throbbing, it felt like it was in her throat.

"It's a simple question, Laura. The answer ought to just roll off your tongue."

She shook her head, unable to speak. Was it Callitrix? It was Callitrix this morning, she was sure. Or had it been Serberus? Maybe it was always Serberus. She looked around the room. No clues.

"Oh dear," said Throom.

"I'm loyal," said Laura. "You know I am. It's just I can't... It's a problem with my memory, not my loyalty to the company."

"But how can you be loyal to the company if you don't know what company it is that you're being loyal to? Where's the logic in that, Laura?"

"Can't you help me, Throom? Doctor? Just – help me."

Throom shook his head, slowly. "Now, after all I've done for you. After all the *company* has done for you."

"There must be something I can do, something you want." It came to her. "A dog! Your little girl wants a dog. I can get you one, I can buy one."

"Callihound or Serberpuppy?"

Laura slumped backwards. "You know I don't know."

"You're saying it doesn't matter?"

"No! I'm saying I don't remember."

"What don't you remember? Don't you remember how the company helped you, raised you up? Don't you remember when you were just a plump little number cruncher on the second floor?"

Laura shook her head, miserable. "Serberus," she whispered. "It's Serberus. Right?"

"Oh Laura," said Doctor Throom.

She sat on a hard chair next to the bed and watched him sleep. His round belly rose and fell,

straining at the buttons on his Hawaiian shirt. He snored, thunderous snores that shook the flesh of his face, comically.

Laura would never be able to sleep in a room like this. It was a mess, for one thing. Books and papers strewn on the floors, every surface covered with beer cans, ashtrays, ornaments. There was a large framed print on the wall over the bed – a Picasso, the image of a woman in geometric confusion – that drew Laura's eye. It was easier to look at than the impossible man on the bed.

"I'm worn out," said Phil – the awake Phil – who was standing in the doorway. "Haven't slept for days. What would I do? Just lie down there with my own damn self?"

This isn't happening, thought Laura. It's all right, because this isn't happening. I'm dreaming. I inhaled some of that Mary Jane and it's affected my brain.

"If I go to sleep, then what happens, you know?"

"I don't know," said Laura. "How should I know?"

"Well, you seem like a sensible girl."

My God, thought Laura.

"I've been taking amphetamines to keep awake. But now I'm worried that it's keeping him – the other me – asleep. Maybe it's making everything worse."

How could it be worse? Laura looked from the sleeping Phil to the wired, wild, completely awake Phil. How could it be *worse* than this? It's a joke, Laura thought. A practical joke on a glib neighbour.

"Give me a match," she said.

Phil threw her a book of them, and she lit one and held it under her hand. Closer and closer until she felt a searing pain in her palm, and she couldn't take it. She wrapped her fist around the match, extinguishing it.

"I guess that didn't help," said Phil.

"Should we try it on...him?" Laura gestured towards the sleeping man on the bed.

"I dunno. Seems kinda violent."

"Well, if you want him to wake up..."

Phil nodded. "I do. I mean, I guess I do."

"You guess?"

Phil shifted uncomfortably from foot to foot. His Hawaiian shirt made rustling, scratchy noises.

They went back outside to the front porch again. The sky was getting dark and the dirt smelled good – rich and loamy, like it was full of life. Laura looked across the street to her house. If Martin woke up, he'd wonder where she was.

"I ought to get back," she said.

"Sure," said Phil.

"Sorry I couldn't help you."

"No big deal."

No big deal, thought Laura. No big deal. Only what if it was a big deal? What if this was her chance to do something different? Here, with this odd man, on this dream-like evening, she heard her thoughts calling to her. What if *this* was the moment to act? What if she could somehow step outside her own life, give up her dependence on Martin, and her tablets, and plastic bottles and Ford cars? She could stay here, with Phil. They could solve the problem of the sleeping man. In a way, Laura wondered, didn't everyone have the same problem? Didn't everyone have a sleeping partner, another self? And what if she could wake *hers* up? Then what?

She dismissed the thought, and hurried home.

"If only you knew," said Throom. "If only you knew how many chances you've had."

Laura's stomach gnawed with emptiness. *I'm so thin now*, she thought, with a sort of hungry triumph. On the viewscreen, the white-coated doctor was shaking his head, and his patient was crying. Every week, it was the same show, the same story with different players. But of course you had to watch. What if Alison mentioned it to her, and Laura couldn't remember watching it? She'd be reported, for sure. She forced herself to concentrate on the screen.

The woman had been caught with an inferior Callitrix product, a Callisandwich. "I was hungry," the woman said through her tears. "I didn't realise until it was too late."

It would be re-education, Laura thought. Re-education, like she had been through when it happened to her. They could have sent her to the colonies, or worse. But instead they had put her to work on the second level. The company wasn't cruel. But the company did have to make a stand.

She still had to undergo the twice-weekly edu-

cation programme, now blaring at her through the viewscreen.

"What if there was really no difference between a Serberloaf and a Callisandwich?" The doctor loomed forward so his face took over most of the viewscreen. "What if it was all the same thing? Did you ever think about that, Laura Harrison? Did you ever think about what's really important?"

Laura shook her head. She wouldn't be caught out again.

"It's Serberus," she said. "Serberus is the best. It's always been Serberus."

But somehow she knew that was wrong.

Georgina was born in Birmingham but now lives in Edinburgh, where she works as a lecturer in further education. This is her second story for *Interzone*. More info, fiction, and links to her published short stories can be found at www.georginabruce.com, along with a blog that she really should update more often.

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BOOK ZONE

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plus author interview

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FITTING TO THE MUSEUM
(Jonathan M. Adams)



THE EIDOLON

Libby McGugan

Solaris pb, 254pp £7.99

"You're asking me to sabotage one of the greatest experiments in scientific history?" asks *The Eidolon's* narrator, theoretical physicist Robert Strong, early on in the novel. This is just before he makes his key Faustian pact with Victor Amos – leader of the highly secretive Observation Research Board, self-appointed global 'guardians' of cutting-edge scientific research, with a mission to protect humanity from the worst excesses of its own curiosity.

Strong isn't exactly living up to his name when he does this. Newly unemployed, newly single – oh, and also apparently seeing dead people – he's more fragile psychologically than he likes to think. So it's perhaps only to be expected that he agrees to help sabotage impending experiments into "strangelets" (theoretical particles which combine up, down and strange quarks, and might just happen to be the building blocks of dark matter) which are about to start at CERN, near Geneva.

Amos and ORB are convinced that the experiment will destroy the world, not by creating a black hole (as feared by some less

scientifically literate newspapers) but through triggering a chain reaction that will transform all Earthly matter into strangelets, essentially converting the whole planet "into a large hot lump of strange matter".

Accessing certain unpublished scientific papers and also noting the somewhat suspicious incapacitation of medical grounds of one of the physicists who wrote them, Strong is persuaded to go undercover at CERN in order to introduce a computer virus into its IT system. Though it goes against his own rational, scientific principles, Strong is willing to do this because the potentially cataclysmic threat from the new experiments at CERN somehow echoes a vision of impending global destruction that he experienced while he was trying to "find himself" climbing with a friend in Tibet.

This is an intriguing, opportune and well-crafted "day after tomorrow" thriller, which is able to get away with a few somewhat James Bondian secret bases and global conspiracies by scrupulously grounding itself not just in its characters' everyday lives and relationships but also in modern particle physics and the scientific method. Much of the narrative is focused on Strong's own personal journey, from being a scientist who needs and lives by facts – a significant factor in his break-up with his partner Cora, whose view of the world is much more about "feelings" – to someone who's a tad more flexible and open in his thinking. Willing, even, to accept that perhaps some things are just, for the time at least, inexplicable.

Given that this is a debut novel, Libby McGugan's first-person narrative is remarkably tight and lean. Yes, there are a few occasions which feel as if she's on the verge of some serious info-dumping, but she swerves the excesses with brazen delight. For example, the

BIG CONCEPTS AND THE MAGIC OF THE WORLD

Paul F. Cockburn reviews Libby McGugan's debut novel and interviews the author

major flashback early on (which fills in the details of the day Strong lost his job) is provided to us while he's effectively at death's door. If there's any time for his life to flash before his eyes, it's surely then!

Much of the success of the novel comes from Strong's personality. Given that the reader is effectively trapped inside his head for the duration, he's thankfully not unlikable company, his more macho tendencies (the mountain-eering, for example) undercut by an innate self-depreciation. But there are other aspects of the novel which engage too, not least some deceptively simple turns of phrase which in their concision encapsulate so much: "I wake up to the scent of Dettol and alcohol wipes, the stench of artificial cleanliness," Strong narrates at one point. "The room is white and yellow, optimistic."

Indeed, waking up – or coming to the surface – is what Strong does quite a lot, both physically and symbolically. Arguably, his whole narrative journey through the novel is nothing less than a succession of conceptual breakthroughs, from the overtly metaphorical expulsion from his former underground laboratory (situated in an old mine, where he spent his time "looking for something no-one can see") to discovering a different approach to the states we think of as life and death. Time and again, he's forced to realise that people are not how they first appear, not least the dead people he keeps seeing. They are the "Eidolon", the shades, of the novel's title, but we're not just talking about ghosts. "Once I tell you, there's no going back," says one of them. "It will colour the way

you see everything – everything – from now on." And they're right.

This kind of conceptual breakthrough – essentially, that the "dead" walk among the living – is often found, nowadays, in urban fantasy novels, but what McGugan brings to the table on this occasion is a solid grounding in science – she has some fun mind-games with the idea that matter and energy "are different expressions of the same thing", for example. It's much more than just some broad assumption that all supernatural creatures are actually real, it's a ground-up reboot of what some might be considered to be a "devil" walking on Earth, harvesting human fear and anger in a Matrix-like way.

Like all good writers, McGugan gives her readers space to question and to think about what's happening. Strong isn't an unreliable narrator in the traditional sense, but he doesn't always pick up on things about himself that the reader can. As a result, this leads to what could be termed (ironically enough) a "reality check" in the latter chapters as most of the novel's various plot and thematic threads are successfully pulled together. That said, there are some threads left deliberately untied, enough to ensure that at least a sequel, if not a series, is possible.

At just 250 pages, *The Eidolon* certainly isn't a narrative of Neal Stephenson proportions. It is, however, an attention-holding, thought-provoking and thoroughly entertaining blend of hard science, human mythology and good old-fashioned "innocent dropped into the deep end" espionage. That it's come from almost out of the blue is all the more exciting.

How would you describe *The Eidolon*?

A Sci-Fi thriller that explores the nature of reality through an edge-of-the-seat story line featuring dark matter, the CERN laboratory, and the boundary between the living and the dead.

That's my publisher's description, and it's better than the one I came up with.

Are there any SF or other genre authors who have particularly influenced your writing or interests?

I like stories that explore big concepts and tap into the magic of the world. By that I mean stories that take something ethereal and make it tangible. Scarlett Thomas's *The End of Mr Y* is one of my favourites. She explores some intriguing ideas and I like her frank style. Philip Pullman's *His Dark Materials* and J.K. Rowling's *Harry Potter* books for creating enticing parallel worlds. Paolo Coelho's *The Alchemist* for its simplicity and power. And if you extend the term author to screenwriter, George Lucas, who took Joseph Campbell's premise and ran with it.

To be honest, I read mostly nonfiction. I have a stack of books on conventional science, such as Brian Greene's *Fabric of the Cosmos*, which I have to re-read every so often as it's such a head-bender. Anyone who uses Bart Simpson to describe relativity works for me. Then I have a stack of books on beliefs systems – Taoism, Buddhism, philosophy and the like.

And then I have another stack that explores a bit of both, such as Jonah Lehrer, or my current

favourite, Rupert Sheldrake's *The Science Delusion*, which delves into the philosophy of science and proposes some fascinating concepts.

Your name is almost certainly new to most *Interzone* readers. Have you had any fiction published before *The Eidolon*?

I wrote a children's fantasy novel about ten years ago. It was a success in that it taught me the staying power to complete a novel, but it would need a fair bit of work before I'd share with anyone! Other than that, I've had some medical papers published, but they're not that gripping.

So this is very much a debut, albeit an extremely confident one. How did you get the novel published? Did you submit it directly to Solaris, or did you go through an agent?

I spent a bit of time thinking about what it would feel like to find the right agent and publisher before I submitted anything. I tend to find things work out better this way. So I went through the *Writers' and Artists' Yearbook* and found five agents who might be interested. There were some positive responses and I had representation within a week. After some more editing, Solaris took it up.

That's pretty remarkable, but not entirely unsurprising as one of the aspects of the book which impresses is how it seems really grounded in science and experience. How much research did you need to do for the book?

It's tricky to say. The research happened in conjunction with the writing. In fact, I was still researching when it came to the final edit. I visited CERN a few years ago, just as they were



"I like stories that explore big concepts and tap into the magic of the world"

preparing for the Large Hadron Collider warm up. It gave me a sense of what an unbelievable endeavour it is, and an illustration of just how powerful our drive is to understand things. It's a huge feat of cooperation crossing political, geographical and specialist boundaries. I spent a bit of time in Geneva to get a feel for writing the scenes that are set there. And I've done a fair amount of travelling and trekking, so I drew on those experiences for the

Tibetan scenes at the start of the book. The medical scenes were easy to write, as that's my day job!

As a female author in what could be said to be a male-dominated field, was it a deliberate decision to go with a male, rather than female, protagonist in the form of Robert Strong?

It didn't cross my mind. I didn't set out to write a science fiction story – for a while I wasn't sure

which genre it really fits into. So the decision to write as a male character wasn't calculated on the basis of who might read the story in the future. The story just came and Robert was just there. It didn't occur to me to write from a female point of view. I did enjoy Robert's cynical streak, although I had to tone it down.

What did it feel like to see your first novel in print?

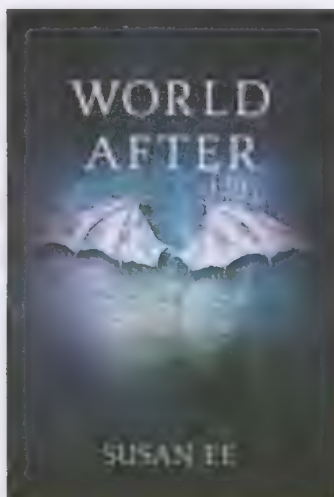
Surreal. It was like meeting an old friend again, someone you used to spend a lot of time with. In a funny way, even though other people can read it now, it seems even more personal, like it's between the story and me. I had a lot of fun writing it. If anyone else likes it, it's a bonus.

What responses have you had to the novel so far?

It's been great – people have been really supportive. Not having a literary background, it's a bit of a gamble baring your soul through words, but I think people get the gist of the story and the idea behind it. There have been some good reviews and it was in the Amazon bestseller list for sci-fi thrillers a couple of weeks ago. There's also been interest from a movie director. Perhaps the most rewarding thing is the connection it brings with other people. That's been worth all those days locked away with the laptop.

So, what projects are you working on next?

I spoke to a few screenwriters about writing a screenplay based on *The Eidolon*. It's been a film in my mind since the beginning – I could see the characters, visualise the scenes and hear the music – so it seemed like a natural step. I finished the screenplay last week, so I'm now back to writing the sequel – and drinking a lot more chai tea!



WORLD AFTER

Susan Ee

Hodder pb, 366pp, £6.99

Barbara Melville

World After, by Susan Ee, follows on from the popular post-apocalyptic *Angelfall*, where the angels have savaged all but a few humans. The tenacious teenage Penryn navigates what's left of the world while searching for her kidnapped little sister Paige. During her quest she must work through her conflicting feelings for Raffé, the attractive and sarcastic archangel guiding her. By the end of the first book, Penryn and her sister are reunited, and have been picked up by the human resistance. Convinced Penryn is dead, Raffé has left to do battle with his own kind. Their relationship – an unspoken but unmistakably romantic one – is left hanging. I opened book two with the same desperation I use to unwrap chocolate when I'm starving.

I was disappointed.

Though *World After* is less contrived and much more sophisticated than *Angelfall*, it's also about half as compelling. Halfway through *World After*, all that's unfolded are a few unmemorable

vicissitudes of resistance life. Well, that's not quite true – Paige has a new found appetite for human flesh – but that's really it, and this isn't even that interesting. Poor characterisation is a huge part of the problem. Penryn, Paige and Raffé are established and well-crafted, but the others aren't. In particular, I found myself frustrated with Penryn's plot-serving mother, who'd pop up now and again with an almost violent inappropriateness, not unlike a Jack-in-the-box at a funeral.

My boredom was catalysed by the separation between Raffé and Penryn, which continues for most of the book. I could feel the tug of an author pulling on strings, denying me what I wanted to know. Well, mostly. Raffé is present in visions, dreams and memories, but for me, this is a cop out. I wanted proper interaction, and I didn't want to have to wait for it. Don't get me wrong – the last thing I need is some off-the-shelf bodice-ripping angel fantasy with sex replacing substance, but at the same time, don't spend an entire book building up a relationship only to take it away in the sequel.

Despite my quibbles, *World After* is not what I'd call a bad book – it's alright. If it had lost a hundred or so pages, and fulfilled Raffé and Penryn's relationship sooner, it might even have been good. But it was never an easy task – it's on the shelf next to *Angelfall*, an incredible page-turner, and surely a tough act to follow. So if I had to explain the root of the book's issues, I'd say the *World After* is suffering from performance anxiety. This story is so dependent on the previous book's riveting plot that it buckles under the pressure. The other elements needed to make this book successful – like pace and characterisation – have all been left by the wayside.



BENCHMARKS VOLUMES 1-3
Algis Budrys, edited by David
Langford & Greg Pickersgill
 Ansible Editions pb, \$20 each

Duncan Lunan

The Algis Budrys *Benchmarks* column ran in *Galaxy* 1965–71 and in *Fantasy & Science Fiction* 1975–93. Publication of the *F&SF* ones fell through in the late 1980s, and is very welcome now.

In November 1975, Budrys defined his position as neither a reviewer (who takes away the necessity to read the book) nor a critic, who “considers literature to be a branch of progress towards human self-knowledge” (setting the benchmark higher than I would), but rather, he suggested, like somebody having a conversation between trains. To gain his hearers’ trust, his duty was “to recommend reading to you, to state my reasons, to shed light on larger relevant good things, to embattle error shrewdly, and to refrain from inventing my facts”. The format basically was an essay on some aspects of fantasy or science fiction, illustrated with reference to the new books to hand. Later he added that his preference was to cite the works he liked, not mentioning the rest;

in July 1984, in enlarging further on that, his example was that he hadn’t discussed David Brin’s early novels because he was waiting for one that he liked. It wasn’t that he couldn’t do detailed criticism: the two pieces that I most remember fully explained his disappointment with Stanley Schmidt’s *Lifeboat Earth*, in May 1979, and Arthur C. Clarke’s *2010*, in March 1983. When really annoyed his dismissals tended to be short, cutting and funny, as when he described James P. Hogan’s prose in September 1978 as “like a falling safe knocking the balconies off a skyscraper” – though he still liked the imaginative storylines.

Collected, the body of work is longer than *Dune* or *The Lord of the Rings*. The first volume alone contains discussions of fifty-nine major writers, quite a few lesser ones, and numerous collections and anthologies, most of them as examples of some larger points about writing in general or speculative fiction in particular. Budrys also covered books *about* science fiction and fantasy throughout, with a particular concentration of them around 1984, and was especially interested in collections of SF illustration.

Many pieces discussed the economics and practicalities of publishing, from his expert viewpoint at the time, leading to such topics as the anticipated fantasy boom of the late 1970s (July 1977), the inaccuracy of jacket copy (September 1977), publishing schedules causing books to be remaindered before there was time for reviews to appear (March 1982), series volumes packaged as if they were stand-alone novels (Volume 3, *passim*), and the appearance of trade paperbacks viewed with misgivings in September 1978 (“Bibliophiles will not like the near future. The far future does not bear contemplation”).

A larger theme was the distinc-

tion between fantasy and science fiction, working up to a position that their modern forms are two aspects of speculative fiction with more in common than separates them – both due primarily to the influence of John W. Campbell, in *Astounding* and *Unknown*, and both reflecting a Judaeo-Christian ethic that if you have talent and work hard, your problems can be solved, however large. The rising popularity of horror, spearheaded by Stephen King, then forced him to a rethink in January 1989: rather than being a subset of fantasy, horror harks back via H.P. Lovecraft to an older belief that individuals are at the mercy of fate or of capricious supernatural powers, thereby enlarging the entire speculative field.

By April 1990, Budrys thought that science fiction was losing its place in the market to fantasy and horror, and might be relegated to a fringe within ten years. As far as he was aware, this was happening only in Britain and the USA, and authors in other languages were still writing SF. Was it because the western lead in technology had been eroded? Or was it because English-language SF had worked out the mine of ideas – did it foreshadow the end of the novel itself?

Budrys gave optimistic answers and, twenty years after the end of *Benchmarks*, he would probably say they were justified. But it’s significant, perhaps even ironic, that these important volumes didn’t appear in conventional form when intended, and are now made available as paperbacks in print-on-demand. That may answer many of the practical problems he discussed, but brings new problems with it – particularly in making new books stand out when now there are so many, instead of the shrunken market which he feared. One wonders what his reaction to those issues would have been.



**THE RABBIT BACK
LITERATURE SOCIETY**
Pasi Ilmari Jääskeläinen
Pushkin Press pb, 346pp, £12.99

Stephen Theaker

Rabbit Back is a small town in Finland. Its biggest celebrity is Laura White, the famous author of children's fiction. Where Tove Jansson wrote about the Snork Maiden, Little My and Stinky, Laura White writes about Mother Snow, the Odd Critter and Dampish. Decades ago, she formed the Rabbit Back Literature Society, to which she recruited local children with, in her opinion, the potential to be great writers. She was right. An isolated elite in childhood, they are now successful but unhappy adults, and, thanks to a particularly fine short story which caught White's eye in the town newspaper, substitute teacher Ella Amanda Milana is about to join their ranks.

Before her new literary career commences, there are mysteries to be solved.

Someone has been tampering with the library books. In the versions held at the local library, Aslan bit off the White Witch's head instead of sacrificing himself, and Josef K. helped Mersault escape from prison. Why does the

librarian destroy these fascinating curiosities? What happened to the other child from the society, the one the others won't talk about, and the notebook of ideas he carried everywhere? Dogs congregate in the front garden of Martti Winter, the overweight loner with whom Ella begins an odd relationship. Laura White went missing on the night of the big party at her house. Why is she now haunting everyone's dreams, "her voice ... the most awful thing, like rustling dry leaves"?

Most importantly, what is The Game these authors play, and what are its rules?

Ella, who makes it her business to discover all the answers, is an interestingly flawed, selfish and manipulative protagonist. She steals books, discloses secrets, breaks into houses and barely hesitates to apply Rule 21 of The Game – which allows torture – because "once you had the other person in your clutches, like a predator, it was easier to temporarily abandon common courtesy". Her reason for using The Game to persuade society members to "spill" their secrets isn't justice or truth, but her academic ambition. The question for her isn't whether she should make their dirty linen public, it's whether she has enough in hand yet to make it worthwhile.

The novel presents a sour view of writers as scavengers picking over the bones of the dead and living alike. Laura's advice to her young protégés was to "learn to look at everything as if you weren't even part of the human race". In another passage Ella imagines her fellow writers perched on a store's shelving, swooping down to catch their prey: "I don't know if you noticed, but this woman has a very interesting way of talking to people," says one. "I just had to have it. I'll probably throw the rest away."

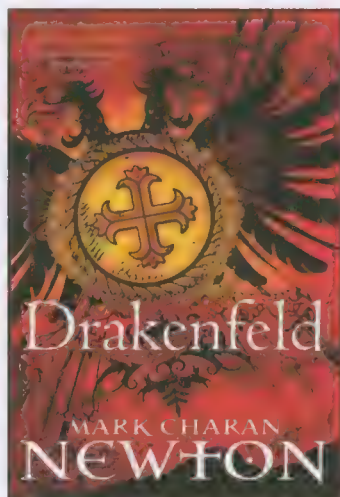
What happens in The Game is a ruthless mining of each other's

psyches for raw, utterly honest material. It is the secret of their success, but has left them raw and wounded. "Thinking might be fun at first, but then you got hooked on it. ... Excessive thinking was eating writers away from the inside out." Contentment is described here as an evolutionary hiccup, Martti Winter believing that "the happiest people were the ones who existed as little more than dimly conscious food-ingestion devices that enjoyed the occasional orgasm".

It is impossible to know how good a translation is without reading the original, but one can judge the translation as a piece of writing in English, and on that basis Lola M. Rogers has done a fine job. The book reads very well, aside from the use of the old-fashioned word "authoress" to describe Laura White, and passages reliant on grammar and punctuation, often tricky for translators, pass by without a hiccup – such as a mention of the subjunctive, and Ella's mulling over the significance of an absent comma in the sentence, "*It's so nice to meet the new tenth member of the Society.*"

Not everyone enjoys stories about writers – is there a less inspiring, less inspired way for a story to begin than with a writer at their desk? – and the way writers are shown here may feel pompous or rather unpleasant to some readers, depending on their point of view. But readers who love stories about writers and writing, who like their mysteries with a dash of fantasy, will enjoy it immensely. If possible, read some Moomins first, to get a good sense of the adorably terrifying corners of the Finnish imagination being explored; this fascinating novel will repay the effort.

Pasi Ilmari Jääskeläinen has been described as "Finland's best-kept literary secret". Well, that secret has now been spilled. No torture required.



DRAKENFELD

Mark Charan Newton

Tor hb, 429pp, £16.99

Lawrence Osborn

I have been looking forward to this novel since the author started dropping hints about it on his blog. He has made no secret of the fact that the story was inspired by his interest in Roman culture and by C.J. Sansom's Shardlake novels (detective stories set in Tudor England). The result is part historical fantasy, part detective story, which for me is an irresistible combination.

The fantasy world he has created is an interesting take on the late Roman Empire. Instead of an empire, his Vispasian Royal Union is a federation of kingdoms. You might expect such a federation to be very unstable, but Newton postulates a neutral peacekeeping force large enough to keep individual nations in line. His central character, Lucan Drakenfeld, is an agent of that force, the Sun Chamber. That is about as far as the fantasy element goes. At one point, Drakenfeld does encounter what might be a ghost. But apart from that there are none of the usual trappings. In this respect, Newton's approach to historical fantasy

is reminiscent of that taken by Guy Gavriel Kay.

The detective element of the story is a straightforward locked room mystery. Drakenfeld has returned to his home city because of his father's death. He receives a summons from the palace: Princess Lacanta has been found murdered inside a locked temple and there is no sign of a murder weapon. He may have a trusty assistant (Leana), but he is no Sherlock Holmes (and she is no Watson). There are no amazing feats of deduction, no brilliant intuitive leaps. Instead he systematically eliminates hidden exits and supernatural explanations and begins to suspect sleight of hand, which casts suspicion on the courtiers who were present in the palace on the evening of the murder. As he pursues the investigation, the body count rises and the finger of suspicion points at a succession of highly-placed individuals.

There are a couple of secondary stories. While dealing with his father's affairs, Drakenfeld discovers that his father did not die of natural causes. Soon he has uncovered evidence of drugs and large debts. Just what was his father involved in? Then there is the story of Drakenfeld's relationship with Titiana, an ex-lover with whom he is reunited shortly after his return. Both of these secondary stories are neatly tied back into the central story.

Another aspect of the book that is perhaps more characteristic of detective stories than of fantasies is the first person viewpoint: the story is told entirely by Drakenfeld himself. Newton does a good job of developing Drakenfeld's character, largely by means of his reflections on his relationships. The result is more than a little reminiscent of Sansom. Like Shardlake, Drakenfeld is conscious of his own inadequacies, uncomfortable with power, and dependent

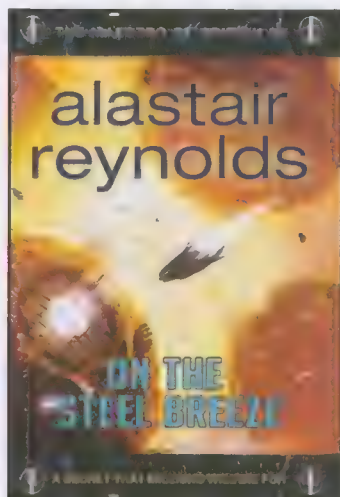
on his assistant to save him from dangerous situations. I was less convinced by many of the secondary characters, who tend to be stereotypical. Leana, however, is a gem: a foreign woman who can match Drakenfeld for intelligence but who is also a very capable warrior. She enables Newton to indicate the racism and the sexism of the society he has created without being heavy-handed about it.

The story is long for a mystery and the action does flag from time to time (usually when Drakenfeld becomes introspective). But the storyline is strong enough to retain the reader's interest.

The world-building in the novel is very good. Tryum is clearly inspired by imperial Rome, and Newton does a good job of evoking the darker side of the city: the violence, poverty, dingy bars and crumbling lodging houses are nicely juxtaposed against the opulence and conspicuous consumption of the royal precincts. I also like the way he builds up the larger political picture and sets the scene for subsequent novels.

Unfortunately there is a certain amount of info-dumping. He does try to use Leana's foreignness as a pretext, but this is of limited use since a created world needs a lot of background information. The real problem here is the choice of a first person perspective combined with a central character who is very familiar with the society being described. I was also irritated by redundancies such as "hurrying...in haste" and modern expressions like "narrative timeline" which tended to disrupt my willing suspension of disbelief, and an overuse of vague adjectives.

Those niggles apart, this is a really good read. If, like me, you are fed up with the 'grimdark' tendency in recent fantasy, you will welcome *Drakenfeld* as a satisfying antidote. I'm certainly looking forward to Drakenfeld's next case.



ON THE STEEL BREEZE

Alastair Reynolds

Gollancz hb, 483pp, £16.99

Jack Deighton

In *Blue Remembered Earth*, the previous volume in Reynolds' Poseidon's Children sequence, the Akinya family was instrumental in the development of the Chibesa-drive engine which drastically increased the maximum speed of space travel. *On the Steel Breeze* is set a very long generation or so later and the family is now much less powerful. Chibesa physics has allowed hollowed-out asteroids, dubbed holoships, to be sent out in strings – "caravans" – to various promising destinations in the stars. These holoships are each large enough to be able to house herds of elephants as well as the emigrating humans. Life-prolongation techniques are so far advanced that withdrawal of such treatment is used as a punishment for crimes.

Chiku Akinya, great-granddaughter of Eunice Akinya, begetter of the Chibesa drive, has an unusual triple identity. A process called Quorum Binding has stamped Chiku's personality and memories on three indistinguishable bodies (her original and two clones) which are able to commu-

nicate almost telepathically. Chiku Red set out after Eunice Akinya's ship; Chiku Green is on the holoship *Zanzibar* en route to Crucible, the extra-Solar planet with the enigmatic structure known as the mandala; Chiku Yellow stayed on Earth. The novel intertwines the fortunes of the three Chikus. Making a reappearance is the artefact of Eunice – an AI in human form – which Chiku's mother developed in the earlier novel. "She" is in a hidden chamber on *Zanzibar* tending a set of enhanced "talking" elephants known as Trantors.

Much of the initial action takes place on *Zanzibar*, in whose caravan experiments to develop post-Chibesa physics have been proscribed. Travertine (who for some reason has a set of personal pronouns, ve, ver, vis, all to verself) has caused hundreds of deaths by an illegal but vital experiment. The holoships have been accelerated too much to be slowed down effectively enough by their Chibesa engines. The caravan's politics, though, are set against the necessary research.

Back on Earth Chiku Yellow, with the aid of the merfolk of the United Aquatic Nations who reunite her consciousness with the returned Chiku Red's, acts on a communication from Chiku Green to seek out a woman who can facilitate contact with their founder, Arethusa, who in turn may have knowledge that not all is as it seems on Crucible. This necessitates a journey to the surface of Venus (and, later, Mars and Hyperion.) Here the plot, as in *Blue Remembered Earth*, comes dangerously close to pulling the characters around the Solar System to show off the author's research or to provide a set piece drama. The inevitable disaster with the space elevator connecting to Venus' surface demonstrates the Chikus have a dangerous enemy. This is the "machine distributed

consciousness" called Arachne which oversees the data produced by Ocular and has infiltrated the aug, the controlling agency of the Surveilled World familiar from *Blue Remembered Earth*. The secret Arachne is protecting is the presence in orbit round Crucible of over twenty enigmatic spaceships dubbed Watchkeepers.

Plot aplenty to be going on with then, and the above merely sketches the set-up. The playing out of the politics of *Zanzibar*'s caravan, involving the clandestine construction and launch of a scout ship to reconnoitre Crucible, the repression and conflict which ensues, the true situation on Crucible, fill out the story. The scout party's meeting with Arachne's avatar on Crucible verges on fantasy territory, though. While any sufficiently advanced technology may be indistinguishable from magic, in SF some degree of explicability is generally thought desirable.

Despite the space-travelling elephants, the mandala and the Watchkeepers, Reynolds doesn't quite hit the sense of wonder button squarely with this one. The scale fails to register. Yet with his holoships Reynolds has – much as he did in *Pushing Ice* – reimagined the generation starship trope, albeit with less of a focus on the ships' passengers than in novels of yore. Also in the mix, though such is the detail of Reynolds' future that they have not yet been explored in any detail, is a Big Dumb Object in the shape of the mandala and a kind of first contact (the Watchkeepers).

An example of the possibility of avoiding what the Watchkeepers apparently think is the inevitable conflict between organisms and artefacts, Eunice poses the question of what it actually means to be human – highlighting a typically human tale of stupidities, betrayals, love and duty.



PARASITE
Mira Grant

Orbit pb, 512pp, £7.99

Matthew S. Dent

What makes the tin-hat brigade of paranoids scarier? When they know what they're talking about, seemingly.

I haven't read any of Mira Grant's other novels, but the spiel attached to *Parasite* establishes her as more than qualified to comment on matters of biotechnology, pharmacology and ethics. The novel follows Sal, who was Sally until a car accident left her a complete amnesiac. In a world where almost everybody has genetically-engineered tapeworms inside them boosting their immune system, Sal's worm having helped her survive apparent brain death makes her a medical marvel and minor celebrity. This places Sal at the epicentre of the events that unfold, all linked to tapeworm firm SymboGen.

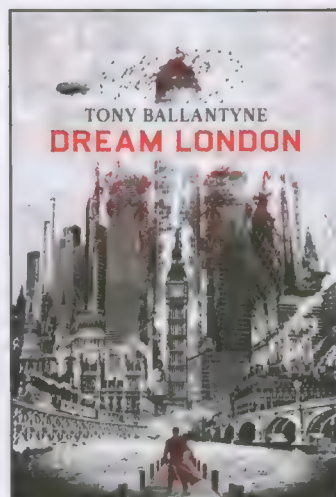
The fact that SymboGen is evil is apparent from the beginning. Grant, presumably, decided that no one would be at all fooled by this fact, so the introductory prologues make it abundantly clear. The manner of the evil,

however is not obvious. Not until about midway through the book, at least. And therein lay the problem I found with *Parasite*.

The writing itself was excellent. Light and quick-paced, it guided the reader through what are complicated and difficult subjects with a confident ease. Similarly, the characters are believable and – for the most part – sympathetic. But the big twist at the end wasn't nearly as surprising as it thought it was. I figured that part out by about the midway mark and was from there on growing gradually more and more frustrated with the novel's refusal to show its hand. Part of that, I suspect, is down to the trilogy format. In the same style as *EastEnders*, it wanted to end on a shocking moment. And so, at least once, deliberately stalled for time on that point.

Which was, as I say, a little frustrating.

I had the feeling that there was space here, if the stalling for time and backtracking could be cut down, for more of the story to be told within the one volume. Maybe all of it. The reason that I make the point is that I enjoyed *Parasite*. I did find the story exciting, and it was something I wanted to read more. But as with an ITV drama, I kept having to wait to get back to it. Which shouldn't, honestly, be allowed to subtract from the fact that this is an easily-readable and enjoyable novel. It is a science-run-amok story in the vein of *Frankenstein*, wherein the question is not how much is science capable of, but how far should it go. The ethical ramifications of scientific advances, particularly in biology, are far from a new subject, but Grant handles them deftly, and she does so in an entertaining and exciting way. There are very few people who would be able to read *Parasite* and not come away having learnt something.



DREAM LONDON
Tony Ballantyne
Solaris pb, 347pp, £7.99

Simon Marshall-Jones

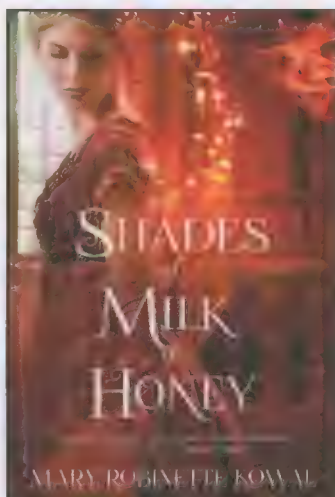
Dreams have been a staple of fiction for as long as it has existed – from the puerile get out clause of “he/she woke up and it was all a dream!” to essential plot-movers or character-altering epiphanies. Tony Ballantyne's latest novel is a different kind of dream: setting and situation is a localised phantasm dumped into the middle of earthly reality, affecting and bending those who live in it. The city of London, the central locale in this tale, has itself become a dream (or, perhaps, more of a nightmare), where the very fabric from which it has been built has turned into a perversely surreal, rock-solid insubstantiality, mangling both substance and mind. Everything has changed – not just people, but buildings have stretched, and roads and railway lines have migrated. Even the Thames, that most iconic of the capital's landmarks, has metamorphosed.

In the middle of this phantasmagoric city lives Captain James Wedderburn, a veteran of the Afghan and Iraq Wars (now a pimp for a group of prostitutes).

He arrived in London just at the time when the changes started, and incrementally, along with all the other inhabitants, has been absorbed into the dream. It isn't any surprise, then, that two factions want his help: the Cartel on the one hand, who want him to stop whatever or whoever is responsible for altering London, and Daddio Clarke, who would like to take advantage of the new opportunities presented by the new reality. Which of these possibilities does he want to embrace?

Ballantyne writes with a confidence that is at once startling and reassuring – writing dreams is much more difficult than would at first appear to be the case, given their often illogical nature. Here, though, the whole book is a dream: events happen in complete contradiction to how they would in real life yet, like dreams, they make perfect sense and don't jar the reader back into the everyday. The city itself is wonderfully portrayed in all its fantastic elasticity and is peopled with a cast of eccentric and outrageous characters, all of whom are as alive and real as those in our world. Wedderburn is himself a very sympathetic figure, cynical due to his past but nevertheless coming across as very human – he's just as confused and bewildered by the metamorphosis of his beloved city as everyone else is, and would rather see it back as it was. Additionally, he has an innate understanding of what happens to people enveloped by Dream London and of how they change, absorbing the dream into themselves unconsciously.

This is contemporary urban fantasy at its finest: taking what is essentially a well-worn (and abused) trope and transforming it into something else entirely. In an age when there's too much repetition of theme and plot in novels, it's heartening to see that originality still exists.



SHADES OF MILK AND HONEY

Mary Robinette Kowal

Corsair pb, 272pp, £7.99

Elaine Gallagher

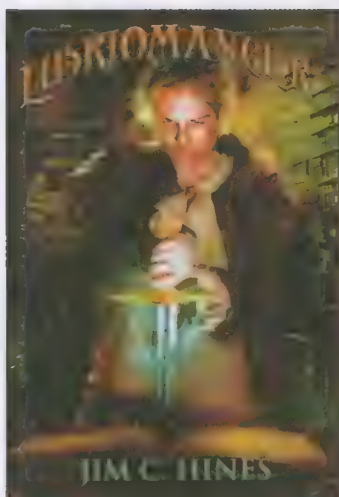
Shades of Milk and Honey is a quite charming novel. It is set in a similar Regency milieu to Jane Austen's romances; of country houses, balls and garden parties, and punctilious attention to the details of courtesy and propriety. In this setting the lives of young women revolve around being marriageable and finding a good husband. One of the ways in which a girl can attract attention is by being accomplished in the arts; in music, painting or glamour, the magical art of drawing threads of ether into existence and weaving them into illusions of light and sound.

Jane is twenty-eight, sharp-featured, and unmarried. She is also an excellent musician and painter, and a natural glamourist, none of which matter to her. While she tells herself that she ought to stand aside for her much prettier and evidently more marriageable sister Melody, she still envies her, especially for the attentions of the very eligible Mr Dunkirk. Mr Dunkirk for his part is impressed with Jane's skill at the

arts, and his sister Beth becomes a good friend and confidante of Jane, much to Melody's annoyance. Into this mix comes the dashing Captain Livingston, and also Mr Vincent, a glamourist of great repute who has been employed by the local nobility to grace their home with a mural. There follow misunderstandings, hurt feelings, jealousies and *affaires d'honneur*.

The language of the book is lovely; note-perfect for the Regency setting in its formality and phrasing, while at the same time weaving in brief explanations in asides so that the concerns of the characters are clear to a twenty-first-century reader. The book owes a lot to Austen, acknowledged by the author herself, but it is its own story. It is of course Austen-with-magic, and the style of magic, the things that people do with it, even the gender and class roles around it, feel authentic to the Regency period and an Austen novel. A wife who is skilled with glamour is an asset to an estate, in that she is able to enhance its grace; for a major work of glamour, a man will be employed. His social status is that of a patronised artist. He will be an ornament to the estate, lauded and envied by the neighbours, but it is not an occupation for someone of good name.

Mark Twain wrote "End the story with a marriage", and this being a Regency romance it is not a spoiler to say that's how it ends. It is a satisfying ending, however, in keeping with modern sensibilities. Jane is much more a modern heroine than might be found in an Austen novel. She learns to value herself for her own accomplishments, not just how marriageable they make her, and although aghast at the impropriety of it, she even steals a horse and rides it astride to try to save the day. I ended up liking her a lot.



LIBRIOMANCER

Jim C. Hines

Del Rey pb, 305pp, £12.99



CODEX BORN

Jim C. Hines

Del Rey pb, 324pp, £12.99



Juliet E. McKenna

For an urban fantasy fan, any book claiming a new approach prompts hope and a little cynicism. A truly inventive take on this market is a major challenge. In *Libriomancer*, it's clear Jim Hines has succeeded. Librarian Isaac Vainio works magic with books. He can draw things out of stories; ray guns, doubloons and, inadvertently, a big hairy spider that defends itself with flames whenever danger's near. While Smudge may be a health and safety challenge in a library, he's a useful early warning when vampires arrive to kill Isaac. Sparkly vampires created when someone with a libriomancer's talent doesn't realise what they're doing, reaching into a popular novel and getting bitten...

Libriomancer is wonderfully inventive and Hines really thinks through implications and consequences. Foes like Sanguinari Meyer are extremely hard to kill now that recent writers have done away with traditional vampire vulnerabilities. Fortunately, Lena Greenwood comes to Isaac's aid.

She's a dryad and a powerful fighter, also out of a book. An untrained libriomancer merely drew an acorn out of her story, not realising the oak tree that sprouted would spawn a magical being. You can't pull a full-sized person through a paperback-sized void. This is just one instance of Hines establishing this magic's limits as well as highlighting unforeseen consequences. He expands on both as Isaac has to explain the wrecking of a peaceful country town library in Upper Michigan to his secretive superiors. An arcane organisation governs this magic, established by Johannes Gutenberg and enabling him to live into the present day.

It turns out Libriomancy's guardians are under attack. Hardly an original storyline for urban fantasy but how many plots are? What matters is how they are handled, and Hines writes with verve. Isaac and Lena are increasingly engaging characters and even Smudge develops an endearing personality for all but hardcore arachnophobes. With

action and humour, new threats and allies, Hines explores this magic's problems and potential as the story unfolds. Voracious readers may become distracted, too eager to identify source material or to anticipate what Isaac will pull from his book-filled pockets next. Thankfully Hines lists his sources, real and invented, at the end, to stop us grinding to a frustrated halt if we can't identify something's origin.

Is there more to this story than entertaining adventure? I seldom felt a real sense of peril for Isaac, though wondering how on earth he'd escape the consequences of his desperate actions assuredly kept me turning the pages. There is deeper substance; the story touches on the morality of ends justifying means and the grey areas between victims and villains, but these are common enough themes in urban fantasy. So while I thoroughly enjoyed the book and gladly recommend it as a very good read, I was wondering about the premise's capacity to sustain a series.

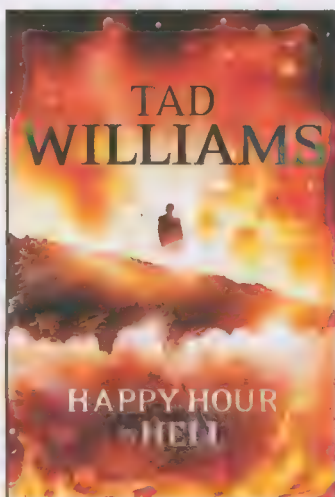
Happily I had the sequel, *Codex Born*, to hand. Isaac is now mentoring a teenage libriomancer, one of the digital generation, who's able to dip into ebooks and draw out their magic. This is wholly

unforeseen and Isaac's soon eagerly imagining ways around the restrictions of paper books, and reluctantly facing up to new complications. For the reader, it's an encouraging indicator that this second book will do more than merely rehash the first. That promise is swiftly fulfilled. Bolder with structure and points of view, as well as increasingly insightful, Hines explores Lena's history and character alongside the main narrative, drawing the reader into the complexities of her relationship with Isaac. Other plot threads explore different relationships; parent and child, teacher and pupil and the stresses of love and envy.

The sense of peril for Isaac increases significantly and not just because he must find out who's killing wendigos and survive when magically-fuelled mechanical pests attack his home and friends. Hines' authorial skills show a harder, sharper edge. While any first person narrative implies the storyteller survives to tell the tale, here it's increasingly apparent there's every chance that Isaac will face agonising bereavement.

This book's enemy is similarly more complex, posing questions for Isaac and reader alike. When is keeping dangerous knowledge from people who don't know how to use it, in their best interests? When is doing so arrogance, or worse, a means of control? What of people's rights to make their own choices? Especially if they have different priorities and knowledge? Johannes Gutenberg wasn't the first to invent moveable type, whatever Eurocentric views of history might say.

Hines found his feet with *Libriomancer*. In *Codex Born* he really hits his stride. While this story's complete in itself, seeds are deftly sown for the next. Now I'm confident this series will go from strength to strength.



HAPPY HOUR IN HELL

Tad Williams

Hodder & Stoughton hb, £18.99

Iain Emsley

Hell might be other people, according to Sartre, but Bobby Dollar, an angel of dubious state, is finding it centred quite literally in himself.

As a locale, it is always going to be difficult to recreate the infernal region from its loftily inspired depictions, particularly Milton and Dante. Like Heaven, its essential quality is its ability to be rewritten and to reflect the needs of the time. Any morality has almost been removed in more recent depictions; here, it and its denizens are largely backdrops for a B-movie effect.

In this middle novel of a trilogy, Tad Williams almost ties up one story and moves us swiftly towards the series denouement. Having lost his demonic love, Caz, to the demon, the Grand Duke Eligor, Bobby decides that he must travel to the underworld to rescue her.

In this world, Bobby Dollar is a gumshoe. There are tinges of noir in the book, and its move into the supernatural verge on a drunken dream sequence – except that he really travels there. The

Smyler, from *The Dirty Streets of Heaven*, is still on the loose and attacks him in both worlds. Although playing a bit part in this novel, the attacker becomes a more interesting character in its confusion and decidedly-changed purpose.

On his Orphic journey, Bobby Dollar is captured and tortured by Eligor in various disturbing ways. The mood tends towards a critique of extraordinary rendition, and the use of extreme violence is surely meant to make a point but it never quite manages it. The extended scenes disturb but not in the intended way. It feels forced in a way that has not been apparent before, with Williams expressing a need to show us in detail rather than telling it generally as he has done before. Bobby's lost love is perhaps sufficient motivation for this as the myth is folded into this novel in an odd way that may yet be explained in the third volume.

In his previous novels, Williams' imagination builds a world with depth in a way that he doesn't quite do here. He managed to define rich places which came alive in their expansion. Here he seems slightly fazed by his precursors and the notion of Hell.

What he does do well in this novel is change the tenor of the series with the shift from the chase to the War on Heaven. The move from noir to war shifts the novel up several gears as the various strands come together. Dollar changes from being a pawn to a slightly tarnished knight with his own secret knowledge.

There is something that is forced with this book, as if it is trying to move from one set of stories to a new one. Actors are lined up and the story is made ready for the finale but somehow the mythology and the epic structures do not really become fused into anything new.



DOYLE AFTER DEATH

John Shirley

Witness Impulse pb, 341pp, £4.32/Kindle £1.99

Andy Hedgecock

"Is there life, is there life? Is there life after death? Do you believe?" 'Life After Death', the classic Ian Hunter track which counterpoints fatalism with ebullient clamour, is pertinent to the theme and style of John Shirley's new novel. Sadly for this reviewer it's also relevant to the time-limited, self-destructing e-galley of the book he received from the publisher.

Doyle After Death hollers for attention above the background hum of a crowded afterlife sub-genre, competing with the beguiling and assured voices of Will Self (*How the Dead Live*), Stanley Elkin (*The Living End*), Richard Matheson (*What Dreams May Come*), John Grant (*The World*) and, of course, Dante Alighieri.

Some writers use the afterlife to envision the future, some relish the satirical possibilities it presents and some use it to rake over the past and settle old scores. John Shirley's post-human domain, a bucolic settlement called Garden Rest, offers readers the pleasures of dry wit, literary invention and intellectual adventure. By Shirley's standards

the pace is comparatively sedate and the tone relatively tranquil, but this is not in any sense a 'comfort read'. The narrative is prevented from meandering into cosiness by the provisional nature of the landscape, provocative metaphysical speculation and a cleverly crafted sense of hazard, darkness and corrosion. Even a land of shadows has shadows of its own.

The book begins with the 'awakening' of Nicholas Fogg, a private eye who has come to grief in a sleazy hotel in Las Vegas. The first being he meets, against the backdrop of a sea of burgundy and amethyst, is a woman called Fiona. As well as meeting and greeting newcomers, resplendent in the tattered wedding dress in which she drowned, Fiona gives her name to the currency of Garden Rest. Fogg discovers much that is strange and plenty that is familiar. He finds ectoplasm, psychophysical storms, psychic birds and weird balls of energy; but there is also sex, cigarettes, money and murder. There is death in Shirley's afterlife: it is unsettling and has profound spiritual consequences. Another discovery – made between noirish flashbacks to Fogg's last case in the world of the living – is that there's the possibility of achieving a transcendent state, but also the associated risk of devolving into a spiritually inferior condition.

Following his encounter with Fiona, Fogg runs into Arthur Conan Doyle and is plunged into the kind of murder mystery tackled by the late author's most famous character. But aspects of this case take it beyond the 'two pipe problems' tackled by Sherlock Holmes into the kind of metaphysical mystery that obsessed his creator in his life beyond literature. The narrative is nightmarish and transcendent by turns. At its heart is a skilfully rendered investigation involving murder, metaphysics and spirituality which

draws on Shirley's fascination with George Gurdjieff and other esoteric writers. The terrifying fate of murder victims in Garden Rest suggests layers of reality beyond our traditional notion of the here-after. Paradoxically, given one personality trait of the title character, a key to spiritual evolution in Garden Rest is overcoming original human habits and passions.

Garden Rest has much in common with Wonderland. Like Lewis Carroll, Shirley creates a bizarre and liminal world underpinned by rigorous internal logic: the ecology, physics and metaphysics of this carefully constructed afterlife are transparent and convincing. And it becomes apparent Carroll and Shirley share a relish for the ludic: there are allusions to characters, real and literary, and smart riffs on the fictional genres in which Shirley has worked in the past – noir realism, sf, fantasy, horror...

Shirley's style is accessible and cinematic. There's a charming clarity, quirkiness and sense of fun in his world-building and *Doyle After Death* is crammed with invention. But it is the story's appreciation of the light and darkness at the heart of the human condition that impresses most powerfully. There's a frisson of genuine terror provided by something more menacing than death. This is not the unimaginable horror of Lovecraft: Shirley provokes soul shaking speculation through vivid and specific writing, while seducing us with his humour and skill as a pasticheur.

This is a highly impressive short novel: it's fun, challenging, provocative and a demanding read in the best possible sense. "Is there life, is there life? Is there life after death? Do you believe?" Oh, yes: I believe in John Shirley's afterlife to the extent that I'm determined my self-destructing e-copy of *Doyle After Death* will be reincarnated on my bookshelves at the earliest opportunity.



THE MAN WITH THE COMPOUND EYES

Wu Ming-Yi (translated from Taiwanese by Darryl Sterk)

Harvill Secker hb, 302pp, £16.99

Maureen Kincaid Speller

The compound eye is not one eye but many gathered together, between them providing a wide-angle view of the world. Insects and spiders have compound eyes; they're vital tools to ensure survival. The compound eye also offers a useful way to think about the structure of Wu Ming-Yi's novel (his fourth, but the first to be translated into English). It is a wide-angle view of a world in which the sight of the two main characters, Alice Shih and Atel'i, has become so narrowly focused they can think only of one thing.

In Alice's case, this is death. Since the loss of her husband in a climbing accident and the mysterious disappearance of their young son, she has lived alone, in a house on the seashore. Lately, she has reached the decision to take her own life, something she sees as an entirely rational act. In Atel'i's case, the one thing on his mind is survival. A teenage boy from a remote island, Atel'i is following the traditional practice for

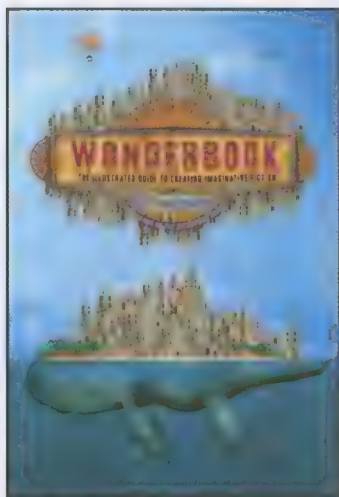
a second son, leaving the island in a canoe of his own making, paddling away to his fate. Given the island's remoteness, this is mostly likely death – the custom disguises a demand for suicide in order to maintain the island's population at a rate that can be sustained.

Except that on his voyage Atel'i encounters something unexpected, a gigantic trash vortex off the coast of Taiwan. This vast island of rubbish offers Atel'i an opportunity for survival, but he struggles to make sense of this new world in which he finds himself. The vortex is due to make landfall on the beach where Alice's house is situated. Thus, when Atel'i is thrown ashore badly injured, it is inevitably Alice who finds him, conceals him and, in her own brusque fashion, nurses him back to health. That's one strand of the narrative, and one that a European reader, conditioned to look for certain kinds of story, can easily extract from the novel.

But to return to the wide-angled view, other elements of the novel are less easily apprehended. The slow but constant turning of the vortex, bringing objects together in unexpected relationships, mirrors the kaleidoscopic nature of the story. The reader learns about the perilous economy of Wayo-Wayo, Atel'i's home, about the lives of the Taiwanese people who live close to Alice's house, and in particular about her friendship with Hafay, the owner of the local café. Hafay's life story starkly presents the dilemma of indigenous people forced off the land and into the towns to make a living, and the ways in which they are forced to earn their way. Their mutual friend, Dahu, seeks to resolve that tension by returning to his childhood home to help Anu with the Forest Church. Dahu, like Alice's dead husband something of a naturalist, explores the local forest and through his eye the

reader experiences something of the extraordinary diversity of life there, a diversity that frequently steps beyond the realms of the scientifically measurable.

The presence of the compound eye, and indeed of its owner, indicates that there are many different ways to address the business of story-telling, and elements that might seem to be mutually exclusive to a Euro-American audience are more easily accommodated within one novel elsewhere. For anyone seeking a traditional genre narrative, or indeed a story that fits snugly within a Euro-American perception of weirdness, this novel may seem not entirely satisfactory, baffling even. But the point is that it emerges from a Taiwanese tradition of storytelling, one which many readers, myself included, have no familiarity with, so we have to take it on its own terms. We might choose to position it somewhere between the work of David Mitchell and Haruki Murakami, and for reasons which become clearer as the story unfolds, to some of Christopher Priest's work, to get a sense of it as a story, but it remains its own thing, a novel of the near-future in which genre boundaries no longer have any meaning. Ecological and sociological concerns rub alongside the fantastic in ways that might seem more familiar from real life than from fiction, and this seems to me to be one of the novel's greatest virtues, that it eschews our expectations of it. Having said that, the novel's use of language seems somewhat odd in places, but whether this arises from the translation or from the writer's original intentions isn't clear. However, it doesn't impede one's enjoyment in any way. The twists and turns of *The Man with the Compound Eyes* provide compelling reading. It is safe to say you will read nothing else quite like it.



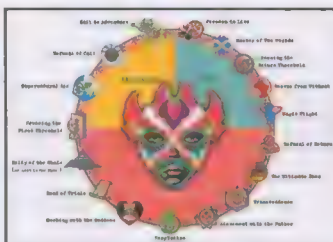
WONDERBOOK

Jeff VanderMeer

Abrams Image pb, 352pp, £14.99

Ian Sales

They say everyone has a book inside them. Some people, it seems, even have a book about writing books inside them. While many of the latter have been written by people whose only published work appears to be a book about writing a publishable novel, there are a large number by authors with long and illustrious careers. This is especially true in science fiction and fantasy, a mode of fiction which has been curiously self-fertilising since its inception in the pages of *Amazing Stories* in 1926. Names from the letters pages of the pulp magazines soon had stories appearing in those same titles. There is a long list of successful science fiction and fantasy writers who have published “how to write” books, from Bob Shaw to Ben Bova, from Lisa Tuttle to Damon Knight, and from Stephen King to Ray Bradbury. And yet, despite the marquee names on the covers, such books are not always useful. Shaw’s *How to Write Science Fiction* (1993) may be an entertaining read, but its advice can be distilled down to “read lots



of books”. The best, despite its age, is probably Knight’s *Creating Short Fiction* (1981). Bova’s *The Craft of Writing Science Fiction That Sells* (1994) is simplistic, and the stories – his own, of course – he uses to illustrate his points do the book no favours. However, Bova did go on to edit a series of books on specific aspects of writing science fiction for Writer’s Digest Books and, while necessarily specialist in the topics they cover, they can be helpful.

All of which is a roundabout way of introducing *Wonderbook* by Jeff VanderMeer. VanderMeer is no stranger to genre fiction – he is an award-winning writer and anthologist, and he also runs a highly-regarded small press, Cheeky Frawg Books. *Wonderbook*, subtitled “the illustrated guide to creating imaginative fiction”, has apparently been several years in the making. Given the book’s size, and its copious illustrations, that’s a boast it’s easy to believe. In fact, as an object, *Wonderbook* is pretty impressive, which is not something that can be said of most “how to write” books.

And yet... There’s something in the whole concept of a “how to write” book which seems vaguely antithetical to the process of creating fiction. The axiom that writing is a *craft*, that is a skill set which can be taught, appears to suggest there is a right way and a wrong way to do it. As a result, “how to write” books often come across as prescriptive – “this is what fiction should be”, “this is what genre fiction should be”... And this can lead to a bland



out of literature written in a science fiction or fantasy mode.

If the recent self-publishing boom has taught us anything, it’s not just that everyone has a book in them, but that most of those books really should have never seen the light of day. It’s not simply an inability to tell a compelling story, it’s that many self-published writers simply do not have the language skills – their books are replete with typos, grammatical errors and malapropisms.

But is a facility with written language all that’s required? Certainly, a writer should know what they are doing before they make a deliberate choice *not* to do it. It’s not that there’s a need for rules, or even accepted ways of doing things...but expectations certainly exist – from editors to readers, from publishers to reviewers...

Wonderbook scores higher in this regard than other books of its ilk – the clue is there in the title. This is a book designed to catalyse the creative process, and then show how to shape that creative impulse. VanderMeer is also clear on *Wonderbook*’s audience: “although of use to beginner and intermediate writers working in any genre, *Wonderbook*’s default setting is fantasy rather than realism” (p xiv). The book covers its subject in seven chapters, titled: Inspiration and the Creative Life, The Ecosystem of Story, Beginnings and Endings, Narrative Design, Characterization, World-building, and Revision. Each chapter contains numerous illustration – some instructional, some merely decorative. There are also a number of sidebar essays by established genre writers, such as Kim Stanley Robinson, Lauren Beukes,

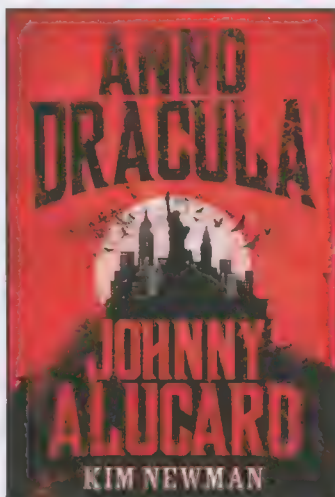
Karen Lord, Ursula K. Le Guin, Nick Mamatas and Neil Gaiman. And a detailed analysis of Vander Meer's own novel, *Finch*.

The sidebar essays demonstrate that asking ten different writers how to write will result in ten different answers, many of which will be either contradictory or too specific to be of much use. Authors with successful careers have by definition experience at writing publishable fiction, but what worked for them is not necessarily transferable. Nor should it be.

There are plenty of examples given of the narrative techniques covered in *Wonderbook*, but unfortunately some of the details are just plain wrong. The love affair in Kim Stanley Robinson's 2312 is between Swan and Wahram, not Waltham (p 87). Iain M. Banks's Culture novels do not "postulate a far future in which humankind has spread out across the galaxy", but are set during our present day – see the novella 'State of the Art' (p 147).

Despite all that, if you're looking for insights into writing for publication successfully, a "how to write" book is not necessarily the best place to look. Shaw's advice – "read lots of books" – may be trite, but it's still the best way to learn how to write. Some such books may present novel-writing as a "get rich quick" scheme, but anyone with any sense knows it's anything but. *Wonderbook* makes no such claims: its lessons are clear, its analyses are mostly unobjectionable, the illustrations add welcome texture, and it's a poor reader who will walk away from the book without learning *something*. For the "beginner or intermediate writer", it's certainly one of the best books available of its type. For the seasoned writer, perhaps not so much – there's just a little too much which feels restrictive...

But that's the nature of writing fiction.



JOHNNY ALUCARD

Kim Newman

Titan Books hb, 480pp, £12.99

Ian Hunter

I am sufficiently long enough in the fang to have copies of Kim Newman's original Anno Dracula series, even owning a "Binary" copy of Michael Marshall Smith's *The Vaccinator* where, after some flipping, the back of the book is now the front of a brand new book, namely *Andy Warhol's Dracula* by Kim Newman, a novella that boasted a cover of four Warhol-like coloured prints of a sneering Sid Vicious. It features in Newman's new Anno Dracula title, *Johnny Alucard*, charting key events in his alternative vampire reality between the years 1976 and 1991. Other key parts of this novel have appeared elsewhere, such as 'Coppola's Dracula', 'The Other Side of Midnight', 'Castle in the Desert' and 'You Are The Wind Beneath My Wings'.

Newman's series started with the wonderful conceit that Dracula came to England and was not defeated by Van Helsing's stolid band of vampire hunters. He went on to marry a widowed Queen Victoria to become Prince Consort, and thus was born an alter-

native British Empire with famous literary vampires taking many of the top positions. Now, in book four, it is the 1970s, but, first, in a scene-setter from 1944, a teenage boy called Ion Popescu (Johnny Pop) meets Dracula, the King of the Cats, his soon-to-be father in darkness, and bides his time until Francis Ford Coppola makes the creative and financial mistake of coming to communist Romania to shoot the definitive version of *Dracula*. Ion manages to return to America with the crew, and a whole continent lies before him, waiting to be conquered by a vampire with his degree of ruthlessness and creativity.

It would be unfair to say that Newman writes better female characters than male ones given the key role that the incarnations of Pop takes within these tales, but there are three wonderfully-rounded characters in Kate Reed, Irish journalist and thorn in the side of the establishment; Geneviève Dieudonné, a vampire elder who is older than Dracula himself and a well-kent face to Newman's readers; and also Penelope Churchward who oversees an elite aerial vampire squadron. Characters aside, Newman's prose is a delight and there is a lot of fun in his sly take on the world of music, film, consumerism and historical events as well as the political machinations and skulduggery taking place between key figures and forces within the vampire and human worlds that co-exist uneasily. Appendix Two, "Welles's Lost Draculas" by Jonathan Gates, is a particular delight.

I've always thought that, after Stoker and Richard Matheson, it's been the female horror authors – Rice, Yarbro, Collins, Hamilton, Warrington et al – who have given the vampire genre its original twists but Newman is right up there with the best of them. Recommended.

FUTURE INTERRUPTED

by Jonathan McCalmont

5.

Profound and Beautiful Lies

There's a wonderful scene in the Coen Brothers' film *A Serious Man* where a student confronts his physics professor about what he feels is an unjust failing grade. The student argues that while he may not have coped particularly well with the mathematical stuff, he did understand the stories about the dead cat and didn't this suggest that he understood the physics? The professor replies that the mathematical stuff is the whole point of physics, the stories are nothing more than fables designed to help us visualise what the mathematical models reveal about the nature of the universe. The stories, though useful, are not true.

Back in the early 1980s, the philosopher of science Nancy Cartwright produced a book entitled *How the Laws of Physics Lie*. One of the many lines of argument pursued by Cartwright is the idea that while the Coens' professor may have been right to distinguish between truth and useful falsehood, most of the laws of physics are themselves nothing more than mathematical abstractions dreamed up to help physicists isolate and study different parts of a single phenomenon. For example, people involved in sending robots to other planets often use Newtonian physics to calculate orbital trajectories because, while everyone knows that Newton's vision

of the cosmos is incomplete, his system for flinging stuff from one planet to the other works pretty damn smoothly. The laws of physics, though useful, are not true.

Despite the fact that science itself is littered with useful lies and non-existent theoretical objects, many devotees of science fiction remain convinced that science fiction must adhere to scientific fact. For example, when seeking to describe the unique challenges of writing science fiction, fans of hard SF are prone to reaching for a tennis metaphor: fantasy writers may create entire universes but these universes are only ever accountable to the whims of the author and the needs of their stories whereas, by contrast, the worlds of science fiction must be accountable to the laws of physics and so the difference between writing fantasy and writing science fiction is like the difference between hitting a ball around and playing tennis with the net up. Aside from being a superannuated cliché, this metaphor is a grotesque and fundamental misunderstanding of what makes science fiction so unique.

Contrary to what some would have us believe, science fiction is not about being correct. It isn't about doing your research, checking your equations and ensuring that none of your ideas are contradicted by the latest scientific



journals. Science fiction is born of the same mistake made by the student in *A Serious Man*, it is about trying to understand the world by creating lies so beautiful and so profound that the light they cast helps us to visualise the truth. This is a column about a tissue of lies so grotesque and transparent that it tells us more about the world than the collected works of Isaac Asimov, Arthur C. Clarke and Greg Egan. This is a column about Reza Negarestani's *Cyclonopedia*.

Cyclonopedia presents itself as a series of nested documents. The outermost layer tells of an editor who is lured to Turkey by a mysterious online correspondent. Once in Turkey, the editor comes across a manuscript purporting to be the reactions of a group of radical academics something written by a dissident Iranian thinker prior to his disappearance. This type of set up will be instantly familiar to horror readers as similar techniques feature in both Mark Z. Danielewski's *House of Leaves* and Caitlin R. Kiernan's *The Red Tree*. The reason these techniques are popular with horror writers is that they allow the author to play with the boundaries between truth and fiction and make their stories far more unsettling. For example, films like *Wolf Creek* and *Texas Chainsaw Massa-*

cre claimed to be based upon real events because suggesting that our world contains deranged killers is far more unsettling than even the best-written stories about fictional monsters. Similarly, works like Philip K. Dick's *A Scanner Darkly* often feature nested stories and lies because allowing those stories to bleed into one another is a really effective way of recreating what it feels like to confuse reality with psychotic delusion. What distinguishes *Cyclonopedia* from works like *House of Leaves* and *The Red Tree* is that rather than blurring the lines between madness and sanity, Negarestani blurs the lines between outright fiction and useful theory.

The theory contained within the nested texts of the *Cyclonopedia* is that the region historically known as Mesopotamia has acquired a form of alien consciousness and plans to expand its boundaries to the point where they encompass the entire planet; an event referred to by Negarestani as the "dry-singularity". *Cyclonopedia* then goes on to explain how seemingly unconnected phenomena such as ancient cults, rogue Special Forces units, peak oil and the War on Terror are all secretly part of the same process of desertification.

Though Negarestani certainly acknowledges the influence of genre writing on his ideas (the book is littered with oblique genre references including a wonderfully unhelpful definition of the term "Cthuloid ethics"), the true genius of *Cyclonopedia* lies in the way that it encourages us to take these ideas entirely at face value. Indeed, the most striking thing about this book is that it looks and reads exactly like the kind of stuff churned out by academic presses the whole world over: Written in almost impenetrable jargon punctuated only by fragments of dead languages and illustrative diagrams that make absolutely no sense,

Cyclonopedia radiates precisely the kind of self-satisfied inaccessibility that we are conditioned to associate with intellectual substance. Like Pavlov's dogs, the university-educated see the run-on sentences and the verbs used as nouns and try to extract meaning from what is essentially little more than page after page of paranoid gibberish.

All of *Cyclonopedia*'s structural devices and stylistic quirks help to set up an ambiguity over whether the found document at the centre of the book deserves to be taken seriously as an attempt to make sense of the West's continued involvement in the Middle-East. What makes this ambiguity so difficult to resolve – aside from Negarestani's flawless pastiche of academic writing – is that while the book may posit the existence of an ancient god in order to explain the War on Terror, this kind of paranoid worldbuilding is really not all that different to the kind of thought underpinning most political theories. For example, when Marxists attempt to explain how society keeps re-shaping itself to ensure that the rich get richer and the poor get poorer, they often invoke the interests of 'Capital' even though the term 'Capital' does not apply to any single group of individuals or institutions. The same is true for the way in which feminists talk about the 'Patriarchy' and Mrs Thatcher refused to talk about 'Society': None of these terms refer to real-world objects like tables or chairs, they are instead intended as short-hand for patterns of thought and behaviour that exist (to a greater or lesser extent) in all of us. None of these theoretical objects exist, they are little more than ghosts in our intellectual machinery... profound and beautiful lies that help us to understand the world and visualise the impossibly complex truth. Negarestani's Mesopotamian desert god is really no different to Capital or the Patri-

archy... it is a useful fiction.

While Negarestani's methods may be new, his use of divinity as a political metaphor actually has a number of recent fictional precursors. For example, Vernor Vinge's stodgy Hugo-winning space opera *A Fire Upon The Deep* opens on an entire civilisation being taken over by a rogue artificial intelligence. To the casual observer this act of cultural possession is indistinguishable from a society tumbling into totalitarianism. Similarly insightful is Adam Roberts' much underrated *New Model Army* in which a mercenary company that crowd-sources all of its decision-making in real time slowly transforms into a new form of life, an emergent collective consciousness whose values are as inhuman as its perspective. If Roberts and Vinge can compare political entities to supernatural ones, why not Negarestani?

The tragedy of *Cyclonopedia* is that while it may create big, beautiful genre-friendly lies and use them to generate surprising insights into the world around us, the book seems to exist in a class entirely of its own. Released by a tiny academic press and written by an obscure Iranian philosopher (who may not actually exist except as a pseudonym), *Cyclonopedia* slipped through the cracks of a literary culture and publishing industry that have become hopelessly addicted to their own narrow and reductive labelling systems. Neither entirely fictional nor entirely theoretical, *Cyclonopedia* occupies a niche equidistant between Olaf Stapledon's character-free future history *Last and First Men* and works of gonzo scholarship like Robert Graves' *White Goddess* and Julian Jaynes' book about ancient Greeks hearing gods thanks to their differently-shaped brains. Some critics have taken to calling *Cyclonopedia* 'theory fiction' but I call it science-fictional as fuck.

LASER FODDER

TONY LEE

MAN OF STEEL

BIG TROUBLE IN LITTLE CHINA

ELYSIUM

UPSTREAM COLOUR

RIDDICK

SCAVENGERS

GAME OF THRONES
SEASON THREE

WOLF CHILDREN



Although the best superhero movie of 2013 is undoubtedly *Thor 2*, Zack Snyder's well crafted *Superman* reboot **MAN OF STEEL** (Blu-ray/DVD, 2 December) delivers a truly magnificent remix of the sci-fi and fantasy classic. Basically, it is a revision of the first two Christopher Reeve outings but, where as Bryan Singer's 2006 *Superman Returns* was merely a straightforward homage to Richard Donner's 1978 original, this aims for a more realistic portrayal of Siegel and Shuster's 75-year-old mythology. Abandoning swathes of recent Kryptonian lore, it presents childhood angst of darker paranoia and otherness that effectively banishes the rustic idyll of genre soap *Smallville* to parallel universe irrelevance.

Impressive production standards throughout are, thankfully, not undermined by handheld camerawork affecting a documentary style. This simply adds to the sense of realism, enhancing

the modern fairytale back story as, despite his adopted/refugee condition, the itinerant Clark rises above ordinary concerns, but avoids the amorality or indifference of an immortal meddler. The primal Moses and Christ imagery is just as obvious as ever, but it is a sombre science fictional first-contact storyline that takes the foreground. This is especially referential in *The Thing's* UFO (found buried under ancient polar ice), but also in the sincerity of its allusions to *The Day the Earth Stood Still* remake and *War of the Worlds* (any version). Henry Cavill's great performance combines the ultimate outsider Kal-El with the humanity of Clark Kent, forged into a singular icon, proving that two into one does go, but only under a pressure significant enough to reveal the grace of a world-saving hero.

Russell Crowe's Jor-El is weak and overused, but Zod (Michael Shannon, *Take Shelter*) holds our interest when he's barking mad. The General's subordinate, super-violent Faora (Antje Traue, *Pandorum*) is cinema's first Woman of Mass Destruction.

Man of Steel commands attention with the biggest scaled-up action scenes yet put on screen,



and many of these effects shots are unrivalled in SF cinema's terrorist disaster stakes. (There was a scene of toppling towers at the climax of *Fight Club*, but that was presented as merely a possibly hallucinatory, quite surrealistic nightmare.) Perhaps inevitably, this movie's urban battle-of-the-gods between Superman and Zod evokes 9/11 imagery and shuttle disasters in a battery of televised references that is actually mildly transgressive for a mainstream blockbuster. On first viewing, the shifting fluid Krypto-nanotech that forms organic-shaped hardware, and the starship/shuttlecraft designs resembling marine life, seem to be just a canny attempt to distance the movie from the crystalline alien tech of its big-screen predecessors, but on repeat playback the livewire aesthetic may well grow on you, to become an appealing if not definitive new look for the doomed other-world's mechanisms and kinetic infrastructure.

Presented here in a fashion that is more effective than ever, the Krypto-mutant Superman really is a unique product of a mixed parentage. While the elite house of El clearly defined his nature, the lowly Kents nurtured his earthly castaway dual identity and ambas-

sadorial purpose. Winningly, this recombination of social/cultural guides undermines elements of the class struggle found in typical superhero archetypes. Just as the Kryptonian house of El are much less aloof, as rebel parents going against all of the strictly controlled norms of their highly ordered society, so the Kents are depicted as far less charmingly wise gentlefolk here than in previous incarnations of cinema or TV. For once, those unbearably nice Kents (much like homely American TV exemplar *The Waltons*) are somewhat rougher edged, almost a hick pairing, and this change of tone is revitalising for Kansas farm-boy Clark's familiar bucolic upbringing.

When the emergent hero's triple identity crisis puts his secret life under threat, it's a 'beautiful truth' and a symbol of hope that will change the world. And grounding this new characterisation in acutely poetic realism drives home the venerable Krypto-lore belief in Superman as the pursuit of ideals and an ethical conviction that humans could be so much better than we are now. "Welcome to the 'Planet.'" Indeed! A sequel, *Batman vs. Superman* (probably including Wonder Woman) is due in 2015.



One of my favourite pictures, John Carpenter's 1986 **BIG TROUBLE IN LITTLE CHINA** (Blu-ray, 16 December) is an ever watchable blend of comedy adventure, ghost story, kung fu actioner, monster movie, fantasy romance and much else besides, as it deftly mixes various genre elements with an engaging style. The traditional roles of a white American hero (Kurt Russell) and his foreign sidekick are reversed. It's not that lorry driver Jack is a coward, he's just completely ineffective as a macho protagonist. The true champion of this tale is Wang (Dennis Dun), partly because he understands the Chinese cultural background, but also because,



unlike Jack, he believes in the power of magic right from the start of their colourful journey down to hells and back.

Throughout all the action scenes, the chases, fights and escapes, the movie has a pace that remains compelling and every break is perfectly timed. W.D. Richter, who adapted the original script, achieved a similar balancing of wacky comic book ideas in a headlong rush of compressed narrative with his own quirky cross-genre cult movie *The Adventures of Buckaroo Banzai* (1984), while Carpenter experiments with more than one

kind of humour in this adventure. In addition to creating a modern western parody and a satire on Asian fantasy, there's a bizarre surrealism found in visual gags and a bumper pack of literary and cinematic references are fed into its busy storyline.

Facing the cheerfully malevolent villainy of a cursed immortal spirit named Lo Pan (veteran James Hong), chalk 'n' cheese duo Wang and Jack and mixed followers combat gangs of henchmen and a trio of super-powered furies in order to rescue two captive brides (one is played by Kim Cattrall) with green eyes

from a sacrificial fate... After giving the "pillars of heaven" a damn good shaking, Jack moves on. He does not get the girl. In fact he doesn't even kiss her goodbye. Reverting to stereotype, he must fulfil the conventional demands of his role as a western loner – much like the fighting hero of Walter Hill's *Streets of Fire* (1984). Jack has weathered the three Storms and, despite himself, has proved that he can handle whatever comes his way. Always ready with a quip as the walking cliché without a clue, the artificial but honest Jack has paid his dues. Yes, "the cheque is in the mail."



With his second movie, Neill Blomkamp confirms his growing reputation and critical standing as one of the best new SF directors. **ELYSIUM** (Blu-ray/DVD, 26 December) boasts witty reflections upon today's deplorable lack of any worldwide social equality, under the insatiably greedy one-percent elite, that may doom our failing 'civilisation'.

While Yann Arthus-Bertrand's outstanding documentary *Home* (2009) expresses the one-world propaganda with unique



Another notable director's second feature, bizarre genre mystery **UPSTREAM COLOUR** (DVD/Blu-ray, 30 December) is by Shane Carruth, maker of somewhat pretentiously abstruse time-travel puzzle *Primer* (2004). While that cult-worthy indie was all about maths and physics, this concerns psychology and biology. It is also blatantly romantic without any comedy, although there is a tragic heroine. As many other reviewers and critics have failed at synopsising the very convoluted narrative of *Upstream Colour*, I will not bother trying... "Each drink is better than the last, leaving you with the desire to

have one more. Take a drink now." Sadly, this check disc did not come with a bottle of suitably vintage booze attached in good time for the New Year.

Like his previous offering, this hits your boggle threshold and keeps on going – brimming over from art-house experimentation into metaphorical mise en scènes of a brain-quake variety. In genre terms, its textual flow/sudden flowering feels like some intoxicated version of an earthbound Brian Aldiss crossed with Jeff Noon at his most telepathically dissociative. Metaphysical specifics are grounded only by sophisticated

new wave standards of 21st century movies, balancing innovative auteurism with the sort of Sundance pimping and cinephile targeted promo campaigns that are designed, knowingly, to court the US/European intelligentsia (if such a community still exists).

The composition of visual poetry here is highly impressive and quite beguiling. As writer-director and creator of the ambient score, self-confessed obsessive Carruth is superbly expressive with both sound and images (even if he's not great as an actor).

Ultimately, however, the introspective complexity and sheer vagueness of his movie's self-rewriting plotline means that this sophomore effort might not repay all the closer attention or scrutiny required to decode all of the apparent nuances of its traumatised main characters, never mind its chiefly subjective model of storytelling. I found it was sometimes incoherent, often wilfully frustrating in its SF allusions, and occasionally a trial of patience, even though it's only 97 minutes. If your preference is for something fairly accessible and/or solidly science fictional, try Brandon Cronenberg's *Antiviral*.

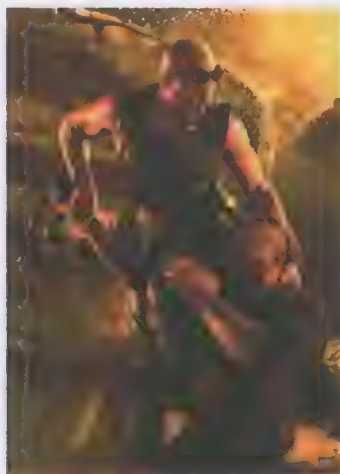
visual perspectives of aerial cinematography, and concludes with an eco-aware message of hope for avoiding a planetary environmental catastrophe – that our already fragile developmental state would probably not survive – *Elysium* speculates upon thorny political issues that underlie the dichotomy between rampant capitalism and social democracy.

The scenario is a proverbial dystopian powder-keg ready to explode as the L.A. slum dwellers view opportunist crime as preferable to underdog

employment, while a 22nd century childhood flashback to lingering unattainable fantasy helps establish an iconic 1970s dream sky, focused upon the ultimate luxury enclave of the titular orbital habitat.

Showing cleverly allusive sci-fi tropes centred upon the rebellious actions of a "favela ninja", the cinematic genre themes of *Elysium* date back to *Metropolis*, so it is amusing to consider Matt Damon's iron-manly suited cyberpunk hero Max as a neuro nuevo-Maria.

While sundry mil-spec thrills ramp towards a radically explosive climax and Max's incisive hospitalisation mission, the movie's likeably jaundiced sensibility and jaunty blockbuster action fun demonstrates why space-prison adventure *Lockout* excluded itself from any viable reality beyond comic book style, while this gritty versus shiny envisioning of severely polarised futurism seems all the more insanely probable despite its staggering wealth gap and cultural disparity.



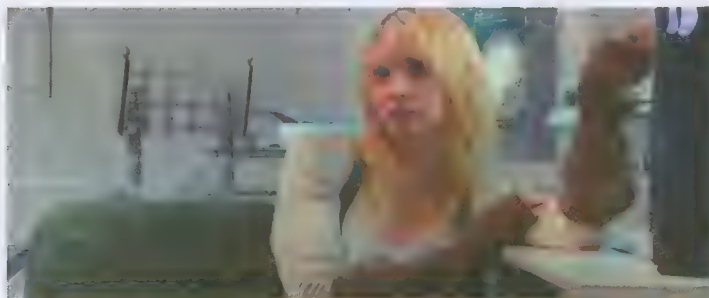
While sci-fi/comic book action movies from Marvel and DC escalate special abilities into city-wrecking, world-shaking, cosmic levels, Vin Diesel unwisely returns to his breakthrough role as the muscular antihero whose only superpower is night-vision. In

RIDDICK (Blu-ray/DVD, 13 January) he still cannot see trouble coming his way. Stranded on a desert planet with disagreeably rugged terrain, he is stalked by weird hyenas and confronted with slimy *Alien* knock-offs. Entering the cross-genre cliché territories, his survival instincts as the lone spacer on a solo-masochist's adventure-holiday result in predictably retro episodes of *Robinson Crusoe on Mars*, until rival teams of bounty hunters arrive.

Stuck in a space opera dead zone, somewhere between *Enemy Mine* and *Dune*, *Riddick* is jaw-clenchingly portentous nonsense that's fixated on Diesel's stony-faced re-Dick reprise. With *BSG* attitude intact, Katee Sackhoff drop-ships in, as part of the second mercenary crew, to play a moving target for re-Dick's verbal abuse. The *Mad Max* style hover-

bikes are cool hardware amidst blatant designer grunge. The finale's hard rain brings out nocturnal predators like scorpion raptors, and that's when all the fast and furious fun starts. With a granite stoicism and croaking machismo enough to please Diesel's gay and girly fan-base, this is not really a patch on the sci-fi content of *Pitch Black* (2000) – that *Riddick* almost remakes – or even the arch camp noir sequel *Chronicles of Riddick* (2004), from which this reboot maintains a safe distance, cold shouldering aside most of *CoR*'s death-cult lore in favour of something like a TV pilot for a 'Celebrity...Get Me Off This Planet, I'm A Survivor' game show.

This hi-def release looks superb of course, and the disc includes the theatrical version (118 minutes) and the director's cut (127 minutes).



No-budget nonsense **SCAVENGERS** (DVD/Blu-ray, 27 January) is a tiresome piece of dark starry grunge about galactic mercenaries vying for salvage rights over alien tech. The movie is the directorial debut of Travis Zariwly, playing on homemade sets with a battery of gaming effects and corny/stale dialogue from a characterless/overacting cast. In space, no one can hear you squirm. It's tuppence ha-penny skiffy lacking even the garage charm and unrealistic appeal of 1980s space opera. Presented with a grade of scrounged together cheapness that would shame Roger Corman's worst production standards, *Scavengers* suffers from early-onset dismallitis and malignant tumours of pure cringe, metastasizing from clichés thought decontaminated long ago. Give this a miss to ensure your personal safety, and protect your family, friends and neighbours from harmful psychological stress and permanent mental disability. This is not just a movie that's bad SF, it's boringly offensive to modern genre concerns. Despite being a production cursed by eye-straining lens-flare that makes it almost unwatchable, even the *BSG* prequel *Blood & Chrome* serves up far superior space opera entertainment to this scrap yard challenger.

PERIPHERAL SIGHTING



Modern fairytale anime **WOLF CHILDREN** (DVD, 23 December) is a feature directed by Mamoru Hosoda. When an urban werewolf dies, his decidedly human lover moves to the countryside where she struggles to raise their kids. It's all too 'Ghibli' for my taste. [Reviewed by Nick Lowe in this issue's *Mutant Popcorn*.]



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GAME OF THRONES SEASON THREE (Blu-ray/DVD, 24 February) is magical but frequently shocks with grisly violence as it explores a fantasy realm in which "truth is always either terrible or boring". Beast-mistress Stormborn (Emilia Clarke) acquires legions of 'unsullied' slave troops, while her trio of tame dragons ensure air supremacy, for military backed campaigns to free the oppressed. The dragons mature quickly but news travels slowly while a different warmonger's ragged army of "moon worshippers and cannibals and giants" marches south for their own survival. Trudging through the icy blizzards, ostensible hero Jon Snow joins them.

Beyond fortified centres of cynical traders and vicious elites, harsh lives and savage deaths await. A man can lose a hand just for talking too much about his wealthy father, and "when you're not getting attacked or killed, usually you're shovelling" shit. Despite the grim atmosphere, it's an engrossing tale woven from macabre histories, comically unforgiving days, and unpleasantly promised futures. No person's dreams or destiny seems to be of their own making. Crude influences or misplaced kindness affects the king-slayers and outlaws alike in the war between north and south.

From the noble sidelines, Charles Dance (as the decadent Lannisters patriarch) and Lena Headey (as his scheming daughter) head the mostly superb ensemble cast of assorted highborn game-players and wily lowlife rogues from the capital to the wilderness, finding out whether "chaos is a ladder" or a pit on a twisty, episodic basis. The graceless whimsical cruelty practiced by the bratty young King Joffrey provides distractingly humorous asides with an obvious potential for terror in scary abuses of power. There are two folksy pagan marriage ceremonies and lots of wholly unexpected, murderously contrived, funerals – especially shocking when it has wedding guests on the sharp end of vengeance. In palaces and slums and forests there is medieval hostility and much of the bloody slaughtering is horrific, but with a powerfully dramatic impact that other TV series, like *Spartacus*, failed to achieve.

Although it's fairly predictable and recycles many genre conventions (there is just as much story-telling as showing), with copious grisly sadism and plenty of gratuitous nudity, *Game of Thrones* remains compelling serial drama with strong performances of intriguing characters (for once, the nominal heroes are just as fascinating as unmistakable villains), excellent HBO production values, and is especially notable for its literate 'sexposition', where usually boring plot details are delivered in acutely bawdy scenes.

MUTANT POPCORN NICK LOWE

FROZEN

CARRIE

THE HUNGER GAMES:
CATCHING FIRE

GRAVITY

THE HOBBIT: THE
DESOLATION OF SMAUG

WALKING WITH
DINOSAURS: THE MOVIE

WOLF CHILDREN

In a town where nobody knows anything, everybody knows one thing: girls are a supersize family bucket of trouble. They defy understanding, resist all control, and spraypaint heart-doodles over everything Hollywood holds sacred. Not only do they wilfully embrace things that are forbidden even to think about in studio doctrine – big casts, multiple plotlines, unstable gender roles, villainless stories with minimal or vestigial conflict, an emotional palette of more than two shades – but they blaspheme against the very catechism of the universal religion worshipped as “story”, contesting the fundamental right of film narrative to fetishise masculine qualities of rugged heroic autarky, physicality before social skills, and crudely mechanistic problem-solving plots leading to zero-sum endgames. But where is the gratitude? We give them their (serious face, now) “strong female characters” who can raise voices and slap villains around with the best while still looking super hot. We let them have their certificated Bechdel lines where they talk to one another about shopping and nails and whatever the hell else chicks talk about other than us. We make them live-action fairytales that die ungrateful deaths at the box office. We greenlight their interminable YA paranormal-romance series and maintain a dutifully impassive expression as they Hindenberg on the first instalment. We put Emily Blunt in everything and never let ourselves be seen mouthing “Why?” And still they silently mock our trousers with their eyes, and go off and stream *Saint Young Men* instead.

Nowhere is the panic deeper than at John Lasseter’s increasingly eastward-looking Disney, who are slowly awakening from years of glacial slumber to the apprehension that their world is

dying. Their prime branded merchandisable for female consumers, the Disney princess, is in peril of haemorrhaging market traction in a world where body image can no longer be trusted to fixate on a freakshow insectoid anatomy of giant eyes and tiny waists; where republican democratic sentiment can demand more of its rulers than divine-birthright privilege to rule; and where professional aspirations are allowed to reach a little higher than being an object of exchange, competition, and prizewinning among improbably heterosexual Ken-like jocks. But if most of the Eleven are no longer fit for market, who will save the Magic Kingdom from the forces of climate change and desolation?

These are the challenges assigned to **FROZEN**, a rescue production plucked from the icy Nordic caverns of development Hel as a hastily retitled and 3D-upstyled followup to *Tangled*, then bumped forward a year from its 2014 date to hit a vacant holiday slot in the studio slate when Disney realised they would have no new princess line for the 2013 toy season. Massive resources were thrown at the project to hit this ambitious new target, including a page-one rewrite from their new star screenwriter Jennifer Lee, who then found herself parachuted in as Chris Buck’s co-director only a year before release, despite never having drawn a cel in her life, and before she was even finished on her breakout feature *Wreck-It Ralph*. Broadway darlings Robert Lopez and Idina Menzel were pulled in to musicalise the evolving feature and to belt it out. Sequences were thrown into final production while the actual storyline was still being figured out, in an extreme version of a process increasingly normalised even in the meticulous and expensive world of animation.

Not surprisingly, the result is an



FROZEN

unusually chaotic and interesting film for Disney, whose last attempt to let a woman direct an animated feature didn't end prettily (when Brenda Chapman was replaced on *Brave*). After seventy years of false Disney starts on *The Snow Queen*, the 2013 version has largely liberated itself from Andersen's actual storyline, while preserving – comparatively boldly for Disney – the climactic act of truer-than-true love that breaks the spell of winter. The major rethink has been to fuse the characters of the Snow Queen and her victim, so that in this version the queen essentially abducts herself and has to be rescued from what she has become by the questing heroine (here renamed “Anna”, on the grounds that no Disney consumer is going to buy a princess doll named Gerda), who is now her own kid sister. Unpromisingly, the result is itself pretty much a remake of *Brave*, with an exiled and villainised family female who has to be rescued from the magical state that has turned her into a figure of power and threat, while variously inept and light-scrupled males mess the kingdom about in her absence. But perhaps in part because of the haphazard way the story came together in its forcibly accelerated development, it's pulled unexpected fragments of other, less fully reconciled narratives into itself, from *X-Men's* Rogue and Iceman to *Edward Scissorhands* to *Wicked* to *Watchmen*

issue 3, in what is now a very comicsy template of superpowered coming-of-age and self-discovery. And since girls like love triangles, which only confuse boys with their mystifyingly complex two-dimensional emotional geometry, the film teases with the riddle of how feistypants Anna can both stick with her giant-vanquishing true love Hans yet also dump him for her fixer-upper quest-partner Kristoff (note the names), whether there'll be any spares to pair, and whether cool sister Elsa will find herself a prince consort or be denied the only fulfilment generically permitted to bipolar Disney ice queens.

For all its insistence that sororial bonds matter just as much as romantic, it's a less radical film than it wants to be – resolving itself only by delivering a formulaic dose of sacrifice and romance straight out of the studio playbook, and delivering its makers not one but two commodifiable princess figures, each with a chibi alternate, in time for the purchasing season. Even its Bechdel performance is offset by a resounding fail on the more diagnostic Nemo test, killing off the heroine's mother within minutes of the opening credits (“See you in two weeks”, with three swift cuts to a gangplank, a storm, and an oblique gesture of mourning). More interesting is a deep class anxiety about an isolated, defensive elite's estrangement from the

masses. Lee's previous princess, *Ralph's* Vanellope, failed to make the official canon, possibly because she was only anagnorised as birth royalty at the finale, and promptly abdicated in favour of a republican constitution (in which she nevertheless contrived to have herself elected president). Here, however, the old order is restored, and the climate apocalypse triggered by aristocratic denial of society proves reversible through the power of Disney love, despite a warning that even princes may turn out to be predators and the longing for love nothing more than a snowman's longing for summer. The boldest turn is the belated, and in some respects superfluous, discovery that the film does after all have a master villain, even if the eventual unmaskee's behaviour to that point makes no perceptible sense. Watch all you like, but there is absolutely no visual tell, even in the places where there should be; the first faint clue comes only with the use of a particular t-word (sorry to be vague, but it's a huge spoiler). Perhaps this is meant, but it could as easily be one more artifact of the fast-tracking, which has certainly left its mark. If it's thought that schoolboys won't be watching and so a chortle-hostage line like “I want you to take me up the north mountain” can be spared the blue pencil, then they still have everything in the world to learn about girls.

The gymslip godmother of this and all other teen-superheroine narratives of puberty and danger is of course Carietta White, who inspired the eighties *X-Men* pioneers that led in their turn to Buffy Summers and her peer group of modern menstrual ass-kickers, and is herself now reincarnated for a new generation in Kimberly Pierce's **CARRIE**. This version's feminist credentials seem

exemplary: a smart, literary, unimpeachably female writer-director with a proven teen-transformation classic in her 1999 debut *Boys Don't Cry*; an actual unsimulated teenager in the lead, after the decade-too-old impersonators of previous versions; and a reinstatement of much that Brian De Palma's bone-lean 1976 version omitted from the novel, including the more active presentation of the teen telekinete's self-exploration and fightback before the blood-bucketed events of prom night whisk matters way out of anyone's hands. Though structurally a close remake of De Palma's film, retaining some iconic enhancements to the source (particularly in the final minutes) and tracking the famous scenes and lines in full awareness that every single moment will be read closely and knowingly against its model, it's a version that has also looked deeper into Stephen King's novel for lost opportunities and nuances, even making time for a glimpse of King's clunky after-the-fact forensic framing narrative, and restoring scenes from Lawrence Cohen's screenplay that didn't make it into the original film – including the rain of stones, cut by De Palma after an FX misfire despite the nonsense it then made of the establishing shot of the White residence. New literary resonances and intertexts include a nod to Lucy Grealy's teen-deformity memoir *Autobiography of a Face*; while Carrie herself no longer settles for admiring Tommy Ross's poem (which the script revealed he stole anyway), but recites from *Samson Agonistes*, of which we're now asked to see her story as a gender-bent modern-dress retread. ("That's the guy who brought the temple down. Samson, right," glosses a less forebrain-favoured Tommy as he inspects her domestic gallery before the fateful outing.)



CARRIE

Sad to say, all these good intentions only pave the road to a different kind of hell for Carrie White to burn in. It's rare that a film fails by treating its material too thoughtfully and respectfully, but Pierce is much too keen to bring Carrie into conformity with modern-day notions of "likeability", and to make the character not the victim but the heroine of her own narrative. The final unthinkable was already thought in Bryan Fuller's 2002 TV version, which saw Sue Snell revive Carrie, fake her death, and convey her to safety

in Florida. Pierce's version doesn't go quite that far, but her tribute to De Palma's famous final jolt offers near-certain assurance that Carrie White does not in fact burn in hell but would be totally up for a sequel, notwithstanding the grim warning of what happened to Amy Irving on her return in 1999's *The Rage: Carrie 2*. Since batshit godbothering Margaret White is a bit of a problem for modern Hollywood's deference to its key audience sector of batshit godbotherers, a newly disputatious Carrie now has scrupulously

to defend Christian orthodoxy by pointing out momma's solecistic deviations from scripture ("I'm not gonna say that! It's not even in the Bible!").

As for the serially overpromoted Chloe Moretz, out of her depth as usual in a role that stretches her well beyond her range, it's not that she's exactly miscast; she's actually quite a strange-looking kid, with that not-quite-hunch and snarl-like smile, and seems all the more so when viewed alongside the classically bland and flawless Gabriella Wilde (as Sue). Certainly nobody could accuse her of not giving it everything she's got. Indeed, there's a lot more ticcy-faced technical acting on display than Sissy Spacek ever needed to bother with, because Moretz has never been one of child stardom's naturals and has to give it welly to make any headway at all. Much more of a challenge is that she's the *only* 15-year-old in the cast, with most of her supposed peers played by actresses with the wrong side of twenty well behind them. This does reap some intriguing benefits: Carrie's late-developing biology, her tininess and fragility alongside grown women, the creepiness of their sexualisation versus her late-onset menses. But it also unsettles the whole film, as a child performer finds herself battling to upstage the older and more experienced co-stars playing her classmates; and the lingering

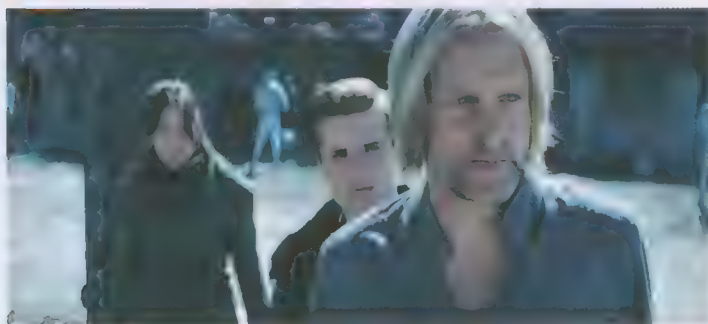
attention to moments lost from previous versions makes for a long 75 minutes to the prom, which arrived at the midpoint of the book and of De Palma's film. It's hard to see today's attention-frugal teens lasting the distance.

The same pacing problem threatens another girl on fire making her return under a new team of wranglers in **THE HUNGER GAMES: CATCHING FIRE**, where Francis Lawrence replaces Gary Ross in the director's seat and a double-Oscarée screenplay (Simon Beaufoy rewritten by Michael Arndt) affirms Lions-Gate's confidence in their reinvestment. They've been wise to throw all they have at this instalment, because the middle volume of Suzanne Collins' trilogy is far more of a filmic challenge than the first – spending more than half its length on the interminable victory-tour mopup from volume one, before we at last re-enter the arena and the novel belatedly zings into life. As it turns out, though, it's the first part that comes out trumps in the film version and the arena sequence that proves a bit of a damp fizzle. Partly it's because the film has ended up a bit of a hall-of-mirrors *Being Jennifer Lawrence*, as our heroine finds herself pimped by a relentless PR machine to promote her masters' business by being paraded gurning to the media in glummy

frocks before she's thrown into the next gladiatorial instalment of her action franchise. ("You never get off this train," warns Woody Harrelson's veteran of the system.) It's made more interesting by the fact that, like Katniss, Lawrence is a genuine as well as a media-made phenomenon. If she hadn't been so reassuringly terrible in her *X-Men* debut, it would be easy to believe her the new everything, and she does a flawlessly convincing job of playing a performer too good at being truthful to perform convincingly as a fake.

But this time the film has rather unexpectedly grown with her, and with Collins' wider exploration of her rather boilerplate dystopian US, which the films have cannily visualised on the very specific model of present-day North Korea. The result is by some way the most resonant modern cinema dystopia (if admittedly not the most logical), and a genuine example of sf cinema using the resources of mass entertainment to probe vividly into things that its consumers prefer not to think about. For this reason, it's particularly unfortunate, if inevitable, that *Catching Fire* has continued with the cutaways from Katniss' restricted point of view to show us President Snow and his advisers conspiring alone – not just because it brings home how amazingly poor the supervillain's convoluted plan actually is, but because a truly effective tyranny of terror thrives on its unpredictable opacity and caprice. Still, new gamesmaster Philip Seymour Hoffman is almost good enough to make it worth it, and if you hadn't read the book you genuinely wouldn't know what game his character's playing. When you put the pieces together, the rather startling decrypted message to young adults seems to be that Panem is already here, and that every time you watch a Lawrence/

THE HUNGER GAMES: CATCHING FIRE



Bradley Cooper dramedy you're complicit in a state-led campaign to brainwash you into compliance with a totalitarian system of control. Are you not entertained?

At first sight, you couldn't wish for a more gender-empowered film than **GRAVITY** – which is after all, among the other remarkable things it is, a bravura solo vehicle for a fifty-year-old actress to show the right stuff in an existential battle against the cold equations of the void, where the only antagonist is absolute nothingness and the only narrative the deferral of annihilation. But this is a film that, more than any of comparable stature in recent memory, is a triumph of filmmaking over writing, situation over character, and the technology of spectacle over its human passenger; and it's worth remembering that Sandra Bullock was not by any means the film's first choice for the role, and that the film has had to be significantly retooled to accommodate her. The 2009 draft, on which Jolie, Johansson, Portman, and everyone else actress higher up the alpha-list passed, is an instructive document. The first-draft Ryan Stone was a complete cipher, a woman without discernible character or history outside the events of the film – perhaps deliberately in keeping with the original project's one-take, real-time minimalism, written as it was as a single continuous scene without visible cuts. Now, possibly it was always the intention to sculpt the blank clay of the character around the performer once cast; certainly George Clooney's character has seen his role not just massively expanded but rewritten as a cartoon parody of a George Clooney character. But the Bullock version of Ryan Stone is still a more telling case. The business with the deceased child, which has been injected since



GRAVITY

the 2009 version, now becomes a single all-defining feature of the character that obviates the need for anything else (including her professional achievement as a civilian scientist and now astronaut), to an extent that would be hard to get away with in a male lead and would probably not, it's fair to say, have been the character core of her (all much younger) rivals for the role, who included such convincing astronaut types as Blake Lively, Abbie Cornish, Olivia Wilde, Carey Mulligan, and Sienna Miller.

The fact is that Ryan Stone was never really conceived as a character so much as a narrative space, a matrix of structural functions around which the story was built, and in effect that's what Bullock has ended up playing: a performance constructed out of being strapped into a rig surrounded by lighting and robots, and yanked around by puppeteers, in a grueling mechanical simulation of the cinematic gaze. Whether this, and a speed at getting out of her suit and down to her underwear that real astronauts can only marvel at, is really any kind of game-changer for cinema is open to doubt. But the Cuaróns' film was never not going to be a knockout, and one can't not wish it well as a sincere attempt to use film to explore the nature of human interaction with

space in ways that tap deep into what it has always meant in sf. If its metaphysics of orbital isolation can't hold an LED keyring torch to William Eubank's extraordinary but barely-seen 2011 feature *Love* (a mystical homage to the works of Carl Sagan, about the ISS-based lone survivor of an apocalyptic Earthside event), it still wipes the screen with everything since 2001 in its evocation of the experience of the world above the world, doing for other astronaut films rather what Jonas Cuarón's partner short *Aningaak* does for *Frozen*. At the same time, though, it has to situate that experience in a strange alternate-universe fantasy in which America never lost the long-game cold war of space exploration; in which the Shuttle programme and Hubble are not firmly in the past and the Chinese manned orbital programme in the future. Some like to think the ending is a dying Stone's deoxygenated delirium, though that's not really how it's shot or written. But the film as a whole is all too easily readable as a Ballardian hallucination produced by a fading space age's final surge of consciousness.

That Peter Jackson's writing team is a pair of women is a fact that's taken a surprising while to assert itself in his Tolkien films. But as

six more chapters of *The Hobbit* get Jacksonised into 160 unremitting minutes of HFR 3D spectacle in **THE HOBBIT: THE DESOLATION OF SMAUG**, taking us from “Queer Lodgings” to “Inside Information” in a series of variously ramped-up and wholly invented set pieces, the co-writers have given us the franchise’s first outright fanfic injection of extracanonical oestrogen into the pipeweed-befugged world of early-1930s Tolkien. Their OC action elf Tauriel is a fascinatingly dissonant contrivance: like Stone, less a character than a patch cord between vacant sockets in the narrative, which here enables not only an all-important connection between the wood-elves and the Dol Guldur campaign, but an isocetes love-triangle (added in the reshoots) of fan-friendly pairings with the girls’ two favourite male crushes, albeit at the price of some of the franchise’s grimmest dialogue and a tragic trajectory visible from Valinor. It’s all rather needless and patronising, given that the *Hobbit* films are already quite girl-friendly thanks mainly to the large cast of dwarves – of whom male viewers are incapable of keeping track, but whose promiscuous superfluity is rather relished by their sisters – and like the lead in *Gravity*, it doesn’t seem to have been a part the A-list wanted. This must be the role for which Jackson vainly courted Saoirse Ronan – who would have

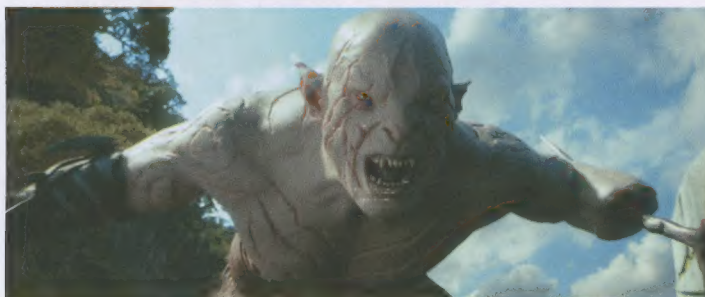
been brilliantly cast in all the ways that Evangeline Lilly regrettably isn’t, but was never going to turn down six other films for this – and one can’t help suspecting it’s only there at all because Liv Tyler’s people wouldn’t play ball and let Arwen out on furlough from Lorien.

At any rate the trilogy is in the can now and barrelling down the rapids, so there’s not much to be done now but brace for the end and pray. A chapter and a bit after the events of this film, Tolkien took his longest break in the writing and on his return, probably in the Christmas vacation of 1932, struck a radically different turn in plot and tone from anything in his earlier draft and notes, suddenly introducing the Battle of Five Armies and associated darker twists that steered the story in wholly unforeseen directions; and Jackson’s attempt to direct the earlier part of the story towards its afterthought end isn’t so unlike what Tolkien himself spent the next thirty-five years mandating in his variously incomplete retellings and revisions. At least with the Prancing Pony prologue (another addition in reshoots) giving us Gandalf’s meeting with Thorin from Appendix A.III, the plan of the trilogy stands clear. As suspected, Jackson’s bodged solution to the Dol Guldur problem – that the Erebor enterprise is a mere sideshow to the never-told main

story of the White Council’s confrontation with the Necromancer – is to roll up the century-long timeline of Gandalf’s plan into the busy year 2941, where he will presumably now meet Thrain in the dungeons of Dol Guldur a century late, having got the map and key off him at their ill-explained earlier meeting, while Radagast will summon the Council sans Saruman for a storming rescue sequence... Well, perhaps it will come off. But of all the Tolkien films to date, this is the one that feels the least like JRRT and the most like the work of the makers of *Braindead*, with every single sequence milked till the dugs bleed, and a certificate-challenging barrage of 3D orcsplatter sending severed heads flying at the camera and arrows penetrating skulls out of the screen. If you pop to the toilet at the right point, you can miss all three minutes of screen-time spent in the actual Desolation of Smaug; and like a chef without tastebuds, Jackson spices up every episode – Beorn, the barrels, Esgaroth, Dol Guldur – by the same device of chucking in a posse of pursuing orcs. The most Tolkienian sequence – indeed, the only one that much resembles the book – is once again the two-handed riddling in the dark. But Jackson’s Smaug is all fire and no smarts, a dimwitted travesty of the formidably canny and percipient enigmatist who sniffs out Bilbo’s history from the tiniest particle of personal data; and Fran Walsh’s insistence on bringing the dwarves into direct confrontation with Smaug gives the film its big, pointless action finish at the price of a further diminution of the novel’s most formidable creation.

At least we have the Cretaceous dragons of **WALKING WITH DINOSAURS: THE MOVIE** to remind us of the ancient rules of narrative palaeontology that no

THE HOBBIT: THE DESOLATION OF SMAUG





WALKING WITH DINOSAURS: THE MOVIE

amount of climate unfortunateness and impact whoopsies could wipe from the earth, in a proudly primaevial tale of Darwinian heroics celebrating a time when men were small-brained lizards and girls were the prize of horn-locking mating rituals. ("You stole my herd, you stole my girl, and now you're gonna pay for it!") In a belated spinoff from the turn-of-millennium BBC animentary brand, runt of the pachyrhinosaur litter Patchi – it takes a moment to realise why they added the T – sees his parents and all but one littermate cut down by the scything circle of life, whereupon he has to work his way up the pecking order to claim his rightful place as herd leader and win the right to inseminate the harem from the stronger, fitter older brother who has usurped his girl because that's what alpha males do. ("Juniper, where are you going?" She: "I'm sorry, Patchi – it's those stupid rules...") The animation is wonderful, and a worthy successor to Disney's own *Dinosaur* from 2000 – in its day the pinnacle of evolution, but a mere fossil now and left behind to die by the digital pack. Unfortunately the script is beyond terrible, its sketchy plot wrapped in a grating dialogue of competing irritating narrators who combine unfunny character comments on the unfolding action with nature-doc intone-over ("He had grown into a young adult just at the time of courtship when

the males of the tribe compete for the attentions of the females", &c.). This in turn is inexplicably delivered by a shapeshifted talking crow to a surly live-action teen who doesn't want to go digging with his kid sister and boring palaeontologist uncle, despite the latter's being played by Karl Urban. There's one amusing line, about mating combats "combining the grace of ballet with the stupidity of banging into things". But then that's essentially the film.

Another pair of wild siblings come of age in Mamoru Hosoda's **WOLF CHILDREN**, the rising anime superstar's most Ghibliesque film to date, which modulates from deceptively boilerplate supernatural romance into a much deeper and more potent fable about a single mum raising two were-kids in a remote mountain prefecture, and struggling to make ends meet and keep their secret from the community as the siblings' very different emerging characters draw them towards poignantly divergent adult destinies. A film with the power to blowtorch the chilliest heart and reduce big hard men with prison tattoos to whimpering puddles of blub, it uses one of the things only animation can do – show children growing and, here drastically, changing – to reflect movingly on sibling relations, familial bereavement and survival, urban life and the natural world, and the parallel journeys

through childhood and parenthood, with the female voices front and centre (daughter Yuki narrates her mother's story, from a teasingly unknown future) as an emotional force-multiplier. Much of the credit here must go to Satoko Okudera, Hosoda's regular co-writer since *The Girl Who Leapt through Time*, who has since applied herself to the live-action remake of *Kiki's Delivery Service*. Passing through and out the other side of a conventional boy-girl fantasy romance in its first twenty minutes, it treats the Hollywood phase of the story as merely the prologue to a much bigger and more powerful story that echoes in the life-experience of every single member of every audience quadrant, while thematically doing everything that *Frozen* does backwards in heels, with ten times the resonance and affective payload. Hollywood would dearly love to get its greedy dwarvish mitts on what this film can do; even the comparatively timid *Frozen* has done extremely well for Disney, and it's nothing to the mountain of gold that's there for the burgling if they only had the nerve to go in and riddle with the anciently wise and merciless beast that guards it – knowing that all the monster has to do is exhale, and their whole world will catch fire.

WOLF CHILDREN



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